CORONET

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FRED ARCHER

author of THE DISTANT SCENE

The Secrets Of Bredon Hill

A Country Chronicle

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THE SECRETS OF BREDON HILL

The author writes:

'The murmur of new farm machinery was a foretaste of things to come as the chattering knife of the mowing machine replaced the silent scythe, the binder the sickle and bagging hook, the thrashing machine's hum the whack of the flail . . . If you like country folk, nature, the longed-for simple life, and you have seen the sun set over Bredon Hill or any other hill, you will understand why some people stayed in their native villages.'

Also by the same author,
and available in Coronet Books:

The Distant Scene
Under the Parish Lantern

The Secrets of Bredon Hill

A country chronicle of the year 1900

Fred Archer

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PREFACE

AS OLD as the hills, they say, so the Secrets of Bredon Hill seventy years ago were just yesterday. The local newspaper of 1900 covered the weekly happenings of men, farming and weather, but what of the Secret Things that didn't get in the papers that first year of the twentieth century? My aim has been to resurrect the way of life of the village folk—the Bowmans in particular, how people lived in the cottages tucked away in every coomb under the hill, this outcrop of the Cotswolds lying between there and the Malverns like a stranded whale, where the beech trees thrive on the limestone and Parson's Folly Tower stands cheek by jowl with the Banbury Stone overlooking the snaking Avon river.

The murmur of new farm machinery was a foretaste of things to come as the chattering knife of the mowing machine replaced the silent scythe, the binder the sickle and bagging hook, the thrashing machine's hum the whack of the flail.

The population of my native village of Ashton had dropped by about a third in the previous twenty years. The true record of its people will tell you why strong men who could handle horses left their twelve shillings per week jobs to drive the same Shires, 'the Black Horse of the Midlands', in railway and brewers' drays over the stone setts of Birmingham's streets. In the pits some curled up, like unborn children, pickaxing coal from the narrow seams of the 'Black Country'. The land remained. The British Empire was at its height. Village education was at a surprisingly high standard, despite the children being frequently away from school on the land, picking potatoes, picking blackberries, in fact anything to get a little extra for the family.

If you like country folk, nature, the longed-for simple life, and you have seen the sun set over Bredon Hill or any other hill, you will understand why some people stayed in their native villages.

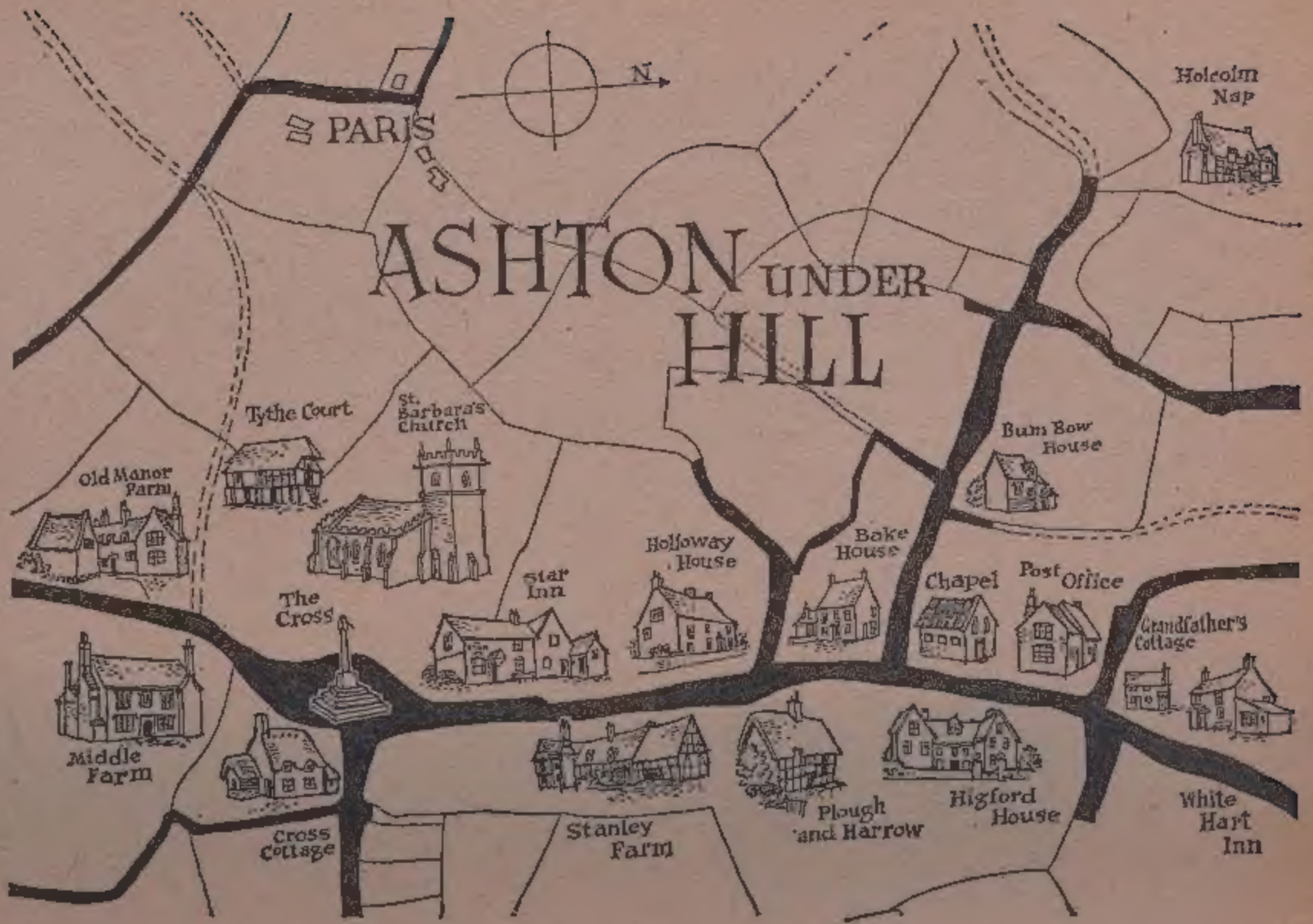
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To THE Editor of *The Evesham Journal* for permission to quote from your files of 70 years ago, thank you.

F.J.A.

ILLUSTRATIONS

between pages 80 *and* 81
Mr Martin
The old Baptist Chapel
The Salvation Army Brass Band
Smith's Stores, Beckford
The Bowman family
The water cart
Four-horse team ploughing
The cider makers


ASHTON UNDER HILL
PARIS
N
Holcolm Nap
Tythe Court
St. Barbara's Church
Old Manor Farm
Bum Bow House
Holloway House
Bake House
Star Inn
The Cross
Chapel
Post Office
Grandfather's Cottage
Middle Farm
Cross Cottage
Stanley Farm
Plough and Harrow
Higford House
White Hart Inn

CHAPTER ONE

NEW YEAR, 1900

ASHTON BELLRINGERS, all five of them, looked thoughtfully at the dying embers in the schoolroom grate. This was the very last supper for them in the century. The village women had cleared and washed up the crocks, Dr Overthrow, who had been chairman once more, had gone home to sit the old year out and the new year in.

'Another hour and it ull be nineteen hundred,' said John Stallard, Captain of Ashton's Church Tower.

'Oi and the old Queen's still on the throne,' spoke up young Jim Bowman. 'Good 'ooman her a bin, our old man rung the treble bell, same as I does, at the Coronation.'

The nine-gallon barrel, trammed and tapped in the corner of the schoolroom, just dribbled another mugful for Jim Bowman's brother, George.

'He's a getting low,' Joe Bradfield belched, 'like the year, oi and the century—almost gone. Pack a feow writing slates a' the backside on him, I can do with another pint; 'tis like the tay pot—some a the best's in the bottom,' and with this Frank Wheatcroft helped Joe to tilt the barrel. Nothing stirred in Ashton School after the last dregs had been drained from the barrel; there was just the monotonous tick tick of the clock, the wheeze of pipe lighting as a pall of blue tobacco smoke rose to the rafters.

Then John Stallard spoke, 'Now then, you chaps, look lissom, it only wants twenty-five minutes to twelve.' As the men rose to walk down the road to the church the chill night air penetrated their thick cord trousers. Soon they were in the belfry. By lantern light, like their fathers before them, five men stood in a little circle. At John's signal the sally end of the rope was grasped and away went the team. One, two, three, four, five. A

merry peal, the last merry peal of the nineteenth century. Nods from John again at ten to twelve; ringing stopped while up among the woodwork and the furrowed wheels where ropes had worn themselves out time and time again, the bells stood green and cold.

'Look slippy, Jim, we an't got all night, bring up the leather mufflers.'

These were fixed in position to muffle the sound of the bells as the old year departed. 'Mufflers in position,' John reported. 'Now for the Buff Peal as we calls it. Mind they be only half muffled.'

The ringing began again, ding, dong, ding, dong, ding. Balm, Balm, Balm, Balm, Balm, the death of the year and the century.

'It's sad mind, five more minutes according to the clock in the ringing chamber,' John shouted above the noise of the bells.

Jim Bowman's thoughts wandered to his father ringing for the Queen's Coronation and how the five Ashton men had rung for two Jubilees. The Queen could not live much longer. Then another Coronation, a king this time. The minutes ticked by until twelve when that pause the villagers waited for arrived.

'Happy New Year,' John said for one and all, 'and let's have them mufflers off. Now for some ringing, you chaps.'

George grabbed his sally. 'Pity we a only got five bells, if we had six we ud ring a peal to be sure.'

'Fire um!' ordered John, and like one man five ringers pulled together and all the bells rang out over the countryside like cannon in battle. 'Keep firing um, we shan't see the end a the nineteen hundreds.'

Blowings now, while the rum Millie Bostock had left for them was equalled out.

'Next time,' John shouted, and away went the bells, sally end of ropes being pulled and loosed as their red and white ebbed and flowed like a tide.

'Remember when Harry Hill never loosed his sally, went up on the rope with the tenor, then let go just afore his brains ud a bin knocked out on the ceiling? Oi, that was the Jubilee of '87,' John told George.

The other men looked at the clock. It was twenty past twelve.

'What about it, chaps?' Jim said. 'I a got to milk master Jinks's cows in the morning.'

The bells were stilled. Once more the men took the night air, this time to the village cross. Here they stood around their lanterns, hung on a bean pole pushed securely in the turf, to sing their carol to the new year, the new century.

Arise ye sleep-y souls a - - - rise!
Take your mor-ning Sac-ri-fice;
Laud and mag-ni-fy the Name
Of our Great Redeemer's fame!

This was a traditional welcome to the New Year, handed down from father to son. As the fourth verse ended, Millie Bostock came from her cottage, inviting the men to walk through to bring her luck. A tall dark man first, Frank Wheatcroft was the man. Here, on the threshold of the new year, Millie poured port wine into dainty glasses, served mince pies on the little mahogany table in front of a roaring fire. Warmed by the fire, by the wine, Millie asked for just one carol in her front room.

'Christmas is come and gone, Miss Bostock,' George Bowman said, 'But we can sing "All Hail and Praise", same as we sung yer Boxing Night.'

Millie knew they would and had the page turned ready in her music book to accompany them on the piano. In the early hours of January 1st the little party went to their cottages, having once more said farewell to one year and welcomed another. As Millie turned down the wick in her front-room lamp and went to bed she prayed the dark man would bring her luck.

Six o'clock on New Year's morning the aged couple Bill and Mary Ann Bowman woke in their low long bedroom at White Hart Cottage. Here they had reared eleven children, all having left except George and Young Jim. Bill, short and spare like a bent miner, lay alongside his stout placid wife. So it had been ever since the day Bill's frail basket lay in Saint Barbara's Church porch while he and Mary Ann threw in their lot as Mr

and Mrs Bowman. Harry, their only married son left in the village, lived at Land Close. He and his wife Emma had four children, Lucy, Polly, Len and John.

'Specs the grandchildren be out a New Yearing,' were Bill's first words to Mary Ann in nineteen hundred. 'Long time since we went, missus.'

'Ah,' his wife said as she lit the bedside candle. 'They ull have to be back at school in a day or so. 'Twas only when I was in service I learned to read and write. You never did have the chance, not that I think the worse of you fer it.'

Bill's rheumaticky bones cracked as he sat up in bed. 'I can tell the time though; just turned six.'

The crackle of burning sticks in the oven grate sounded up the stairs. Bill and Mary Ann's sons, George and Jim, were making the tea, getting their breakfast.

'Lucky bwoys them two, the older uns had more meal times than meals, amus famished we was.'

'Muzzy yud I a got, George,' Jim muttered over his bread and yellow fat bacon.

George laughed, poked the fire, poured Jim another mug of tea. 'It's last night's liquor, thee cosunt take it, bwoy.'

Then as Jim left to milk Sam Jinks's cows, George walked alongside him down the dark village street to fodder Fred Abel's horses ready to start ploughing at first light.

Bill and Mary Ann Bowman came downstairs to the candle-lit room to breakfast by the fireside, Bill's one trembling hand clasped the baluster as his other held the candle. Mary Ann followed very slowly walking backwards, every stair a challenge to her twenty-stone body, her thumping heart.

' 'Twas nice to see some of our brood home at Christmas, Mother, I allus be glad to see um, especially the girls, and what they brings is useful.'

Mary Ann sat in her chair in the half light of the candle and fire in the living room they always called the 'House'.

'Ah,' she said, 'our girls went to service in Cheltenham and one to Derby. The older boys you couldn't expect to be like us, satisfied on about nine shillings a week. Joe went on the rail-

road, Billy to the Black Country at the iron works, Frank to Canada, ah and George and Jim be good bwoys a working your allotment now you be past it!'

'I ud be working now, Mother, if that foreladder hadn't broke on the waggon and I fell off the load a straw hitting my yud on the cobbled rickyard. Still, at seventy-nine what can you expect.'

The donkey in Bowman's stable was braying for his breakfast so Bill pulled an armful of hay from his little garden rick and took him some. Priming the pump he watered him, then brought a bucketful into the House, dropping it by the crock sink for his wife to start the washing of crocks, the cooking of scraps for the pig. In the garden Bill took a ladle, wooden-handled, to the swill tub, dipped it in and poured pigwash into an old bucket. A handful of sharps, half a saucepan of hot water, and he stirred until the pigs' breakfast had some resemblance to gruel. 'Thur, Satan,' he said, 'get that lot into ya, we wants you fat for Candlemas.'

Back in the House Mary Ann read in the local paper a few items which might interest Bill.

'Sprouts be up to four shillings a pot, apples two shillings to seven shillings in the market. Have our boys got any on the 'lotment? Raisons be threepence a pound at Warmingtons, oranges thirty for a shilling.'

'I tell ya mother, I be past it. How's the war a gwain in Africa and the sparrows shoots around yer. Market prices won't affect me at my time a life. How much charity coal did us have this Christmus, Missus?' Bill enquired as he poked the January fire, making blue flames draw up the chimney. 'We be in for some frost, see the blue flame up the chimmock.'

'Taylor's brought us five hundredweight, same as all sixteen a we so-called aged poor.'

'I be dalled, Mary Ann, that myuns easy with the poker, we had ten hundreweight in '96 but now they tells me 'tis twenty-two and six a ton and 'twas but seventeen shilling then a day.'

Mary Ann looked solemnly at her man who was aged, crip-

pled and poor. 'Besides, the old Vicar ud got a bit of interest on the money over from the year afore. Jane Dunn was a good 'ooman when her left that money for the likes a we.'

Bill said, 'I speak as I finds. That wording on the graveyud stun, what does it say, Mary? You a read it to me times enough.'

> In Memory of Jane Dunn
> Daughter of Joseph and Jane Dunn
> Who died Oct 26 1880 aged 86 years
> She bequeathed £150 for the benefit of the
> aged poor at this Parish, the interest to be
> distributed by the Vicar of Beckford for the
> time being in Coals annually at Christmas
> for ever.

'For ever,' laughed Bill, 'that's a hell of a long time.'

'Please don't use that word,' his wife piped up straightening her back. 'Hell's to be feared and well you knows it. Coal unt everything, Bill,' Mary Ann muttered as she nudged Bill on her way back from the pantry with a stew jar the colour of a new penny. A stew jar full to the brim with rabbit, swede, onions, carrots, all ready to pop in the oven.

'Our George and Jim ull want summat to warm um tonight and how good they be, allus bringing home a log for the fire in their frail basket.'

'And a rabbit, happen,' added Bill. 'And you've heard about young Bradfield a-gwain to A'sum to buy a new frail basket from Averills. They asked him how big he did want him and he said, "Oi, big enough to carry a gate pwost hwom in".'

Young Jim who worked for Sam Jinks, had brought home enough dry Brussels sprout stems from last year to fire the wash-house furnace regularly on Mondays.

'As long as we don't have to depend on parish relief I don't mind.' Bill clenched his perfect set of teeth as he said it—teeth, he boasted, that had picked up a sack of wheat when he was young and foolhardy. 'I don't want to be beholden to John

Bostock, the guardian, as shoots our cats in the Little Piece for a pastime. No, I'd sight sooner be laid anant Jane Dunn.'

'Bill, what be you coming to!' Mary Ann remonstrated.

Bill Bowman's forecast of frost was right but shortlived. A few moderate frosts that January knit the ground but four days out of every five, so it was recorded at the neighbouring village of Beckford, it rained. 'As the days lengthen the cold strengthens,' Bill said.

Sam Jinks allowed Jim to clear the sprouts on his father's four-acre holding in Carrants Field. By donkey and cart he took them to A'sum market along with the last of the parsnips, clearing the ground. Sam lent Jim two horses to plough it. The small parnsips made wine for Bill, put life into the donkey. It was obvious that Carrants Field had got too much for the old folk to work, so Jim planted wheat for sale and for grinding to use in his mother's bread oven to provide sharps or middlings for next year's Satan the pig.

Sundays at White Hart Cottage were an opportunity for the Bowmans to get together. Bill and Mary Ann were hosts to Harry, Emma and the children, George was free after feeding Fred Abel's horses, Jim between milkings. On Sunday evenings in the house place when the hawthorn log warmed the hearth, Jim entertained Harry's children with his phonograph; his pot hamper of cylinder records brought music of a kind through the horn. The boys amused themselves winding the key and watching the governors as 'Little Boy Blue' scratched out to the family circle.

Bill sat back in his wooden armchair exclaiming, 'Well, I'll be dalled! It unt natural.'

Mary Ann crossed her arms over her huge aproned middle as her feet met with Bill's on the brass fender.

'Enough for one night,' the master of White Hart Cottage announced. 'Get the book down, Mother.'

From the shelf in the ingle came the black family Bible with the names of all the Bowmans since Bill's marriage clasped inside by two brass clips.

Lucy, Polly, Len and John were all children of the village

school. 'Read to your Grandad', Bill, who only knew scraps of the book by heart—a few psalms and a little of the prayer book—ordered the children. Lucy read quite well about Ruth and Naomi gleaning the cornfields. Polly read how David killed Goliath. Len's portion was the story of the Prodigal Son. Then it came to John's turn. John read rather badly but did know pieces by heart. He started off, 'In my father's house are many mansions if it were not so . . .' then he paused and said 'Brummigum'. Switch came grandfather's walking stick across his young shoulders. 'Now look here my bwoy,' he said as John smarted from the stick. 'I can't read, you know it, but it don't say Brummigum in the Bible, now read on.' John tried, halted, was tempted to say Brummigum again when words failed. Mary Ann closed the brass clips on 'the Word', as it was called at chapel and presently Harry, Emma and the children made their way home to Land Close.

Although brought up to be 'Church', Mary Ann and box-hatted Bill often went to the little chapel on Sunday. A Bradfield sat on the box hat, and the stick which propelled Bill chapelwards knocked the dust out of young Bradfield's trousers that Sunday.

Harry Bowman's four children were as much as he could feed so it was left to George and Jim, both at home, to provide for their parents—pay the rent, look after the donkey, the pig and the Carrants Field planted with wheat now that Bill's adventures in small-scale market gardening must end.

January 1900 was very little different from any other year apart from the rain. It came down in bucketfuls. George Bowman said that as he walked behind Abel's team of four horses, the water ran down each furrow like a mountain stream. School was due to start on January 12th when the four Bowmans would make their way from Land Close to the middle of the village. When the rain was not too heavy they ran to school, but the pupils stayed away at every possible excuse when the weather was too bad. The school log book read:

'Jan 12. School opened with poor attendance. Jesse Jinks returned after a long absence. Shows great deficiency in all sub-

jects. The girls suffering severe cold. excessive colds.'

The following day, 'Very wet day, young children away in consequence.' Then at the month's end, in the last week of January, Dr Overthrow, Chairman of the School Board, arrived one morning with his thermometer. It registered 32°F so he ordered the school to be closed that day. The reading the following day was 40°F so the headmaster cancelled the syllabus and the boys and girls spent the whole of the day at drill and singing to keep warm. Then the coal arrived and the circle around the school fire warmed and dried their knees.

'What's in the *Journal*?' Bill Bowman asked Mary Ann one Friday night.

'Nothing much this wick!' she replied.

'Dazed if that unt a rum un, all that print and nothing in the *Journal*.'

Mary Ann looked for interesting reading for Bill, looked for something about the outside world. The winter had closed in on Ashton and the village was almost like a monastery. Nobody came, nobody went. The farm men did their unpleasant winter jobs, the women knitted and sewed by candle and lamp light; when the fogs came a stillness which could be felt prevailed as the dew drops froze to rime on the hedges. Half a mile past the White Hart pub was the parish boundary, the district boundary and the county boundary where the Brook Bridge crossed the watercourse off the hill. It was as if so far and no farther must Ashton folk go; even the different colour of the road stones showed that. Here was the place where the two roadmen, and the two policemen, men from different counties, arranged their meeting at certain times, day or night. To live in this enclosure was to be a native, to live outside was to be almost a foreigner. Men met at A'sum when they could afford to go by train. At Tewkesbury market, stockmen for instance, would meet, and, as Ashton was under the Vicar of Beckford, the two villages had to unite on occasions. The funeral bier was kept at Beckford, and Beckford held to the Parish Enclosure Award like grim death until Ashton's Parish Council got a look in.

'What about the *Journal*, missus?' Bill asked again.

'Well, General Bullers a-gwain to Ladysmith, I see. I'll read it: "The Worcester Yeomanry are at Capetown, General Buller says we are going to relieve our comrades at Ladysmith, there will be no turning back, our men's health is good".'

'It is to be hoped as Soldier Bradfield and young Hubert Proctor be all right,' butted in Bill. 'The Bradfields be upright men.' Bill was especially anxious about young John Bradfield, away fighting the Boers. To him South Africa might be another planet.

'Shall I go on?' Mary Ann turned the pages. '"Fourteen A'sum volunteers marched to the station behind the Volunteer Band playing Soldiers of the Queen. Lord Lovat a raised a hundred deer stalkers from the Scottish Highlands for South Africa." Yer's a funny bit, You remembers Tom Harris as used to live anant the church? He lives at A'sum now, works for the Council. Listen to this, Bill: "A'sum reservist to the front. A sort of send off we have been accustomed to when Thos. Harris rejoined the 2nd Gloucesters. Most people, the main crowd, rushed the G.W.R. Station, the police barricaded the platform, but much to everybody's amusement the Band, the Mayor, the Councillors and Tom Harris went to the Midland Station opposite. The Mayor wished him goodbye. Harris said to his wife, 'Cheer up, there are better days in store and if I stand sideways the Boers ull never hit me'." Oh! perhaps this is more in your line, Bill. "The sparrow shoot at the White Hart, January 20th. The sparrows had the best of it today, they were artful birds and refused to rise and the sportsmen"—('Sportsmen,' grunted Bill)—"ultimately engaged a small boy to lie down in a furrow and throw the birds up. Even then the assembled competitors only succeeded in killing three of the poor little birds so we don't know how the sweepstakes were settled. Considering all things, the boy in the furrow had reason to be thankful that he did not carry home some shot." '

'That reminds me,' Bill smacked his lips as Mary Ann put down the paper. 'I'm agwain to moisten my mouth at the White Hart.'

Bill reached his topcoat from the peg on the door, took his

stick and his candle lantern, and head bowed, joints creaking, went down the path.

'Not too many, mind,' Mary Ann called. 'Don't let um make a fool on ya.'

Over the cider, the Bradfields and the Wheatcrofts, who worked for John Bostock, told how Rev Grant had stopped one of the Bradfield soldier boys and asked if he had been confirmed. 'Oi,' he says, 'I a bin confirmed and vaccinated but neither of it took.'

'That's a good un,' laughed Bill, 'but ast heard about the Jacksons as lives in Ashton Wood House? They be more or less cut off with that little farm. This year they never had a calendar or almanac but Syd Jackson had an old hen as stopped in the back kitchen. Her allus laid in the clothes basket by the mangle, every day. When her had laid seven eggs they knowed it was Sunday. Well, last wick she missed a day and dall my rags the Jacksons thought Sunday was Saturday and worked all day long, then to top it all Mrs Jackson come down to church in her finery a the Monday.'

'A pint for Bill for that,' Fred Wheatcroft ordered.

As January ended and Bill lay by Mary Ann in the feather bed, little did Satan the pig know that Candlemas was near and soon he would be hung like two pictures on the Bowman's wall. But January was a hard month for the old folk, one or two had slipped away with pneumonia to lie near Jane Dunn by the church tower. Dr Overthrow was dispensing cough medicine to the barking folk of the village, poulticing the chesty. But for the young there were compensations, like the late Christmas treat which began at four o'clock for sixty-two children. The Christmas tree was lit with candles, Miss Hayward gave the presents and organised games and after singing The Queen they went home each carrying an orange and a lemon. The Inspector's report at the village school was encouraging:

> A very good year's work has been done and reflects credit on the teachers. Arithmetic and spelling are excellent. Reading some hesitation. Drawing not so advanced as it should be.

There is a vigour and earnestness in the conduct of the school and the managers do their part well by it. The infants well advanced in all respects, cheerful and attentive to lessons. Care must be taken not to overcrowd the room and children over seven should not be retained in it. The staff must be strengthened. The class subjects and recitation well taught. Mrs Holland has been appointed to sweep the school in place of Jane Ballard who is too ill.

Recitations	Standard	I	What a child has
	Standard	II	Lucy Gray
	Standard	III	The Wreck of the Hesperus
	Standard	IV	The Curfew Bell

Harry and Emma's thoughts on January's end were that the frost would bind the mud from Land Close so that the little ones could go dry shod to school.

CHAPTER TWO

FEBRUARY

When Smocky Sallis's postcard arrived at White Hart Cottage, Satan had his last meal. Smocky, the pig killer from Washbourne, was described by Bill as being a bit religious. Mary Ann thought him a good man. He always put a text on his visiting cards. 'If that yunt a licker,' Bill laughed as he leant over the sty wall while his wife read Smocky's card: 'Tuesday I shall be coming to kill your pig, morning 6 o'clock D. V. *Be ye also ready.*'

'D.V.?' questioned Bill. 'What the nation does that mean? I allus thought six o'clock in the morning was a.m.'

'D.V.,' Mary Ann explained, 'myuns God Willing, in other words if we be all spared until then.'

'Be ye also ready,' muttered Bill. 'We all got to go when the time comes, ready or no. A bucket of lukewarm water for you this morning, my bwoy,' Bill said as he poured it in the pig trough. 'It's Candlemas today and tomorrow morning Smocky will be yur and he ull want you to have an empty belly.'

Down at News Farm Harry Bowman was busy in Fred Abel's stable grooming two five-year-old geldings. 'Getting um up for sale' it was called. With ribbon and straw he plaited manes and tails, scrubbed their hooves after walking them through the shallow stone-bottomed horse pond. He sponged under their cruppers, then when the feather hair dried below their fetlocks, he combed it until it hung over the hooves like silk. 'Two useful animals,' Fred Abel said as he entered the lantern-lit stable, 'Fit for town work.'

'Oi,' Harry sighed, 'I beunt looking forward to loosing these two fellas, handy a pair as ever walked Ashton clay.'

Frank Abel ran his hand down their shoulders, felt every bone in their forelegs, opened their mouths to make sure they proved

themselves as five-year-olds. Fred hung on the harness peg, two new halters from Ernie Burge. 'Now that ull set um off with the golden straw, the red, white and blue ribbons. They should make fifty a piece at Candlemas Fair today, they won't need no ginger under thur tails.'

'Harry gave each horse a small skip, or basket, full of oats, chaff and mangels. They cleaned the wooden manger like a butcher's slab on a Saturday night. Harry stood and admired their jet black winter coats, sponged their pink noses free from breakfast and put the halters on.

'You had them shoed all round Saturday at Harris's at Sedgeberrow, Harry?'

'Yes, gaffer, and when they be out in the yard we'll look at thur feet.'

Out in the yard Harry lifted one foot after another saying, 'Come on now—up.' Fred Abel examined them, poking the last bit of clay from around the frog with what Harry described as 'the thing a purpose' on his knife.

'All correct, Harry, now off to A'sum Fair. Walk them quietly and when you get there don't leave them. They will be a bit nervous in a strange stall and we don't want any crooked horse coper to frighten them or knock them about.'

'Gaffer,' Harry said as he tied the halter rope of the second horse to the tail of the foremost, 'leave it to me, thurs no man fonder of dumb animals than I be.'

As Harry approached A'sum Town Hall, he saw a crocodile of horses head to tail moving up High Street, all beribboned, glossy coated, ready for the dealers, the farmers, the Birmingham buyers of dray horses for the railway, the breweries, the mills. Then lined up under the wall in the sale yard they took their places in numbered order. Young, unbroken horses, Welsh cobs, moorland ponies, were penned in the square, iron-bowed cattle-pens, penned tightly so that they could not kick or injure the others. The market reeked of ammonia from the horse manure, it swarmed with men in velour hats, some with jay feathers in the broad band; men in tight breeches, cloth leggings, coloured waistcoats, men with long whips, keen eyes.

When Fred Abel arrived by train from Ashton station, he found the Birmingham and Black Country men more than interested in his two geldings. Up and down the High Street Harry ran them one at a time, past the Railway Hotel while dealers, farmers, cracked whips, watched the action as they ran to and fro. Harry puffed and blowed until the time came for them to enter the sale ring.

'Now, gentlemen,' the auctioneer shouted, 'the first of Mr Fred Abel's geldings. Warranted sound in wind and limb, a good worker in all gears, free from vice, you couldn't buy from a better farm or buy animals broken in by a better carter.'

Harry led his first charge around the ring. Horsey men stopped him, opened its mouth, felt its forelegs, rolled back its eyelids, pulled at its hide, and a Birmingham dealer walked away and stood under the auctioneers' rostrum.

'Now, gentlemen,' the auctioneer said, 'Who will start me at fifty guineas?'

'Forty,' said the dealer.

'A bad start at forty.' But the bidding went on until the dealer bought it for fifty-two guineas.

Harry loosed the halter and took the second horse off Fred Abel. As before the auctioneer said, 'I can recommend this one, he was at plough last week.' Said Abel Fred, 'He's as sensible as a Christian, he takes no notice of steam tackle, nor trains.'

'Now then, gentlemen, you hear what Mr Abel has to say. Sixty for this one.'

'Forty,' spoke the dealer.

'No, I shan't start under forty-five.'

'Forty-five.' John Bostock spoke up and kept bidding until he bought the horse for fifty-four guineas.

'Back to Ashton, that un's agwain,' thought Harry. 'He ull only be in the next field to ours.'

'Luck money, Fred.' John Bostock was not slow in coming forward. 'I helped him on tidy.' Out of his leather purse with the string fastener, like a little bag Mr Abel took a half-sovereign piece and gave it to his neighbour. 'Now, Harry, take him back to Ashton and put him in Mr Bostock's stable.'

Once more Harry walked the five miles to Ashton but this time with one horse. The workers in the fields stared as Harry Bowman went up the Groaten Road. 'Look ya', said Joe Bradfield to John Stallard as they cropped the roadside hedge. 'Fred Abel have only sold one oss.' But they were wrong. Mr John Bostock had bought the best back to Ashton.

Next morning at six o'clock Smocky Sallis arrived at White Hart Cottage. A short, ginger-haired man, wrapped in blue and white apron, carrying a frail basket of knives, sticks, hooks, ropes and steelyard weighing tackle. The bench was on the gravel path near the sty under the Belle de Lorraine plum tree. At the side of it lay a bolting of wheat straw and stuck in the garden a short shuppick or pitchfork. Jim and George Bowman had the copper furnace boiling and two buckets of cold water from the pump handy. In the dark February morning, when the wind had veered round, coming straight down the Elmley Castle road, to the north, the overnight frost had made it clean underfoot in Bowman's garden. Smocky had walked from Washbourne to Dumbleton, past Hopkins Coppice where the roosting pigeons flapped from elm to larch, from larch to oak, as his lantern disturbed them. Then he had crossed the Thurness, that sticky clay which luckily was frozen to concrete, over the turnpike road, up the Groaten to Bill Bowman's.

Bill propelled himself to the sty, watched his two sons help Smocky kill the pig. The squeal woke the neighbour's children and as soon as the bolting of straw was forked over the dead pig, a bunt put in his mouth, another under his tail, Smocky sniffed at the wind. 'Coming from Kerso road by Elmley, unt it, William?' he asked Bill. Smocky lit the straw so that the fire travelled the way the pig lay. He continually shook the burning straw with the fork. Around the flames, in the morning black, circled the village boys—the Bradfields, the Wheatcrofts and the rest. Harry Bowman's children ran up from Land Close; to them it was like the burning of Joan of Arc they read of at school.

'Turn him belly uppermost, George,' Smocky spluttered rubbing the straw smoke from his eyes. 'Thurs a bit a bristle as

wants singeing from round his greaser.'

'His peasel, he means,' one of the bigger boys told his mates.

As the minutes ticked by the fire went out, the broom came out of Bill's hovel while Smocky brushed the blackened carcase. 'On the bench, again, chaps, and look slippy, you got to get to work I reckon.'

With a razor-sharp knife, Smocky shaved the few remaining bristles, swilled hot, cold, lukewarm water on the pig until he lay clinical white on the elm bench. Now he took out liver, lights, chitterlings, placed them on blue and white meat-dishes, into buckets of clean water and with a hook in each hind hock and a rope between, Smocky, George and Jim hoisted the pig to hang from a short piece of broken plough trace on the lintel of Bill's hovel. A nut stick to prop his belly open to the frosty air and both George and Jim had done all they were wanted for that morning. In Bill Bowman's house Mary Ann had cleared the brown crock sink to receive the chitterlings. Smocky ran them through and left them to soak ready for turning inside out the next day.

'Bit a fry, Smocky, afore you goes hwom?' Bill enquired.

'Oi, I see you got some lard in the pan, I can do with some fittle and Mary Ann, have you got the top of one of your batch cake loaves? I rather relishes your home-baked bread,' and Smocky sat opposite Bill with the frying pan sizzling in between them.

'Drap a cider?' Bill tempted. Smocky shook his head. 'I signed the pledge in '91 and I don't drink, taste, nor handle since. I wears the blue ribbon when I goes out but don't begrudge you, Willum, if you likes it.'

'That muuns a pot a tay for Smocky, Mary Ann. Where be ya?'

Mary Ann came in, made the tea, turned the liver, cut the bread, and, for one morning at least, they breakfasted above their class. On enquiry how much they owed, Smocky told the aged couple that he would be along on the morrow to cut up the pig. He would then collect his one shilling and sixpence.

The evening following, by lantern light, Smocky split the pig.

The neighbours' share of the offal, the small joints, jowls, eye pieces, chines, were all placed on flats, dishes, in fact anything at hand. They were returned unwashed, for to wash them would have been an insult to Bill and Mary Ann Bowman—a rule handed down from father to son.

The next morning's post brought a letter from Frank Bowman, Manitoba, Canada. Mary Ann read it to Bill with steaming spectacles, quivering hands.

' 'Tis to be, hope it yunt bad news,' she said, sliding her finger along the fold in the envelope. 'Ah, they be all right, Frank and family almost froze to death but, Frank says, when they arrived on the Allan Line ship, then overland to Manitoba, there was the land—160 acres of virgin prairie for every man over eighteen, then other land at four and twopence an acre with three years to pay.'

Bill stood silent for a moment with his bent back to the fire. He clutched his knobbly ash plant in one hand and stroked the stubble on his chin with the other. His mind went back to years ago when he could cut an acre a day of corn or grass with bagging hook, with scythe; when he could dig a chain of land a day, carry two hundredweight and a quarter and fourteen pounds of beans up the granary steps. He thought how he had fathered eleven children, besides the ones they didn't rear.

'We sent a feow Bowmans down the road to school.' Then Bill paused. 'Do you mind the time they summoned me for not sending um up and my hevidence? Oi, the *Journal* was worth a tanner that wick. Read it, Mary?'

From the mantelpiece Mary Ann brought down a faded yellow paper. She read the headlines—'I've shod um all round' —'Bill Bowman of Ashton at Winchcombe magistrates court when summoned for not sending three children to school told the Bench: I've brought no money with me, I've left none at home but I've shod the youngsters all round and they ull be at school on Monday.'

'Hard times, Bill,' Mary added, 'when we had no shoes for the little uns. Our family ull be better off. Ah, a bit more news from Frank. The fare cost him about fifteen pounds, he's turned

the corner, he says, and he and his missus have already cleared some of the prairie.'

Bill's fingers twitched on the rough-hewn walking stick. 'If I was forty yeurs younger my jadder would be swinging alongside Frank's a-clearing the prairie—mattocks they calls um in the town.'

Mary Ann sighed. 'You can't put the clock back, but I was ashamed when the little uns had no shoes.'

'Never went short of fittle though,' Bill laughed, 'especially mutton.'

Mary Ann stood up at her husband's side looking him straight in the eye, their faces almost touching, bristled Bill, bespectacled Mary Ann.

'Who stole the yow sheep from Beckford Market and spent the night in Winchcombe clink? I wondered where all the mutton was from and you a God-fearing chapel man.'

'It was like this, the day of sale had been a hard one on the allotment. I'd bin picking gillyflowers all day in hampers.'

'Go on,' Mary Ann said, 'I've yerd it all afore.'

'Well, this ship broke out of one of the pens and me and Long Fred Broadfield ketched her in a corner. We roped her in my donkey cart, put the hampers atop and afore you could say Queen Victoria, her was in my shed, hung where the pig was yesterday. By the time the case come up we had eat most of the mutton. Mary Ann,' he said, 'how can a father stand by and see his youngsters short of fittle, it's against nature whether I be a God-fearing man or no.'

Days for Bill in the winter of 1900 and the winter of his life were spent pottering about his garden and paddock, feeding the donkey. It wasn't fit for him to go to the allotment, even to have a look at what the boys had done. Then the snow came. A travelling tailor was found dead on the near-by Cotswolds in a three-foot drift—dead standing up.

The frost that followed put many men out of work. The stockmen still cut kerfs of hay for the yarded cattle, took loads of hay to the outwintered stock in the field, but the frost soon bound the clay arable with bands of iron. No ploughshare, no

coulter would enter the land. Parish relief, such as it was, became vital. Some of the younger men walked to A'sum, bought a box of fish and hawked them around the villages; some played fiddles, tin whistles at the pubs for money. Where the plough teams had trod the furrows of our steeply landed country, the plough alone stood, half-covered in snow, drain pipes slid on to the wooden tail handles to protect them from the weather. The skaters patterned the River Avon as men glided their way, scarfed and gloved, to Tewkesbury from A'sum. These were the lucky ones—single men without a family to keep, market gardeners who had raped the plum and apple harvest of the Vale.

Jim Bowman broke the ice, carried on his yoke shoulders water for Sam Jinks's twelve milking cows. George's plough lay in the furrow bound with frost, but Fred Abel had a spare rick of clover hay and took George to Gloucester to buy two-year-old colts to break in to harness.

'Get some useful horse flesh,' Fred said, 'and you can have a go at the fallen trees down out of the coppice. Green horses,' he said, 'in cold weather when they aren't ribbed up in show condition, will handle well.' So off to Gloucester on the eight-twenty from Ashton went master and man. Some farmers were glad to get rid of a horse or two to get the rent for Lady Day; some because the hayricks were going fast like butter melting in the sun. Fred bought two half-legged two-year-olds—very different quality from those Shires he had sold at Candlemas.

'But, Gaffer,' Harry remarked in the Spread Eagle over a pint and bread and cheese, 'them 'osses won't be man enough to pull our plough next year happen.'

'Here a minute, boy,' Fred whispered. 'They are for the A'sum market gardeners when they are handy—dray horses for horse hoes and the like.'

'I got ya,' spoke up Harry. 'What be them two farmers arguing about over in the corner?'

'A bull, I reckon.' Fred knew the procedure.

'Thirty pounds I want,' said the Welshman from Brecon—'a fair price for a Hereford ten-months-old, one that will make a

beauty in twelve months.'

'Twenty-five,' the Gloucestershire grazier offered.

'No, no,' the Welshman replied, 'but I'll take off five per cent of thirty pounds, that's the limit.'

The Gloucestershire grazier looked over the bar where a dark-haired dark-eyed country girl was pulling pints.

'Yer, Miss,' he said. 'If I gave you five per cent of thirty pounds how much would you take off?'

She leant on her elbows looking the grazier in the face and replied, 'Lors, I'd take everything off for that.'

Harry Bowman turned to Fred Abel. 'It yunt the place for a decent married man like me, but dos't reckon it ud be worth thirty bob?'

'You never done so bad at Ashton school, Harry, working that out, but it's horses I want you to ride. Forget the barmaid—they have to 'tice a bit on market day.'

So, horses head to tail, Harry took the cold frost-bound road to Tewkesbury and Ashton.

'Her wasn't too bad, that thur barmaid, but it won't do to tell our mother,' he thought.

The evening Harry called on his dad at White Hart Cottage. They talked across the charity coal in the oven grate, they smoked a pipe of twist from Gloucester.

'How's the 'oss trade, Harry?' was Bill's opening question.

'Oh, good 'osses be wanted, Dad, but anything left-handed, occud like, it's middling.'

'Ah,' sighed the old man, 'ant it allus bin the same. Occud animals, occud folk be a nuisance.'

Harry laughed, remembered his school days, and told his old dad that even Bobby Burns left a wish that when he died 'Don't let the awkward squad fire over me'—that was the Volunteer Army over his grave.

'Farming do seem terrible slow, Dad,' Harry added. 'Three hundred days to wait for a mare to foal, then another three years afore the colt is put in shafts. Ten years of bloom on the apple tree before there is a crop.'

The old labourer puffed at his clay, the strong twist tobacco

smoke reddening his eyes.

'You talk of time, Harry, bless the bwoy, it only seems like isterday since I bought the long case clock for five sovereign from Wards at A'sum on our wedding day. It must pass quickly for the Almighty, they sings at Chapel "A thousand ages in thy sight are but an evening gone".'

'I be sort of tied to the land we walk on,' said Harry. 'Tied cottage at Land Close and the youngsters to fend for, or else I don't think I'd stop in Ashton. It's a poverty-stricken place where lots of folk have more meal times than meals. We country clodhoppers be thought to be slow, our patience and courage in hard times is thought by some to mean we got no aim to get on.'

'Our Jim ull get on,' Bill assured him. 'He's a cut above the rest of the family. Signed the pledge last wick, saves the drink money.'

Harry put his browned, short clay pipe in the top pocket of his cord waistcoat. 'Dad,' he said, 'I likes a pint at the Star without abusing myself. Six till six is my working hours six days a wick, the nut brown puts heart into me. Our cottage, as you knows, is one up and one down and a landing, it's hard on the missus but the beer puts the sun into me, drowns the bitterness of work.'

Harry sat down beside his liberal chapel father, the waning fire slipped down the grate.

'Mind ya, Dad,' Harry continued, 'I'm glad Jim has signed the temperance pledge but the parson's not getting me a-fooling in the Reading Room while he gets hold on ya and talks temperance stuff.'

'Without prying into your affairs, Harry,' the old man nervously rubbed his corduroyed knees as he spoke, 'is Emma in the family way?'

'Oi,' Harry said, 'more's the pity—it happened last October when some of us had bin to A'sum Mop.'

'Nature, I suppose,' Bill Bowman added, shouting 'Mother'. In came Mary Ann trembling like a leaf. 'Mother, our Harry got another nipper on the road.' 'Well, well, well,' was all the

old lady could say, but as Harry took his topcoat off the peg behind the door, his dad whispered in his ear as he left the cottage, 'I haven't lived nigh on eighty years for nothing, I rumbled that another grandchild was coming and there's a chine on the bacon rack kept a purpose for the christening.'

Ashton folk were too poor to bother about Valentine's Day but Bill Bowman that morning reminded Mary Ann of the Valentine she sent him so many years ago.

'Pretty it was, Missus, I got it in the box atop of the stairs.'

'Winter's back breaks about the middle of February, Bill,' she said, 'but 'tis sharp this morning, still freezing like big guns.'

That afternoon Lucy and Polly Bowman called, sliding in hobnailed boots from the school to their grandparents' cottage.

'We have seen something wonderful this morning, Grandad, in Mr Bradfield's garden,' Mary Ann gave them each a piece (bread and jam) and sat between them on the sofa.

'What have you seen, my dears?'

Lucy spoke up. 'Ernest Bradfield's name wrote in snowdrops on the grass under the damson tree.'

'Just like Ernest,' Bill laughed. 'I was one of the feow as knowed about it. He planted the bulbs last year in that fashion with a crow bar. That ull read Ernest Bradfield long after I be up in St Barbara's churchyard.'

'But Grandad, you can't go there, there's the donkey to feed,' cried Lucy.

As the February frost gave a bit some days, George Bowman ploughed Fred Abel's stubble. The steam rose from the four-horse team as they warmed to the collar in the icy wind. The horses' breath, regular as an engine, puffed in jets forward to the hind quarters of the horse in front. The chilblained ploughboy's hand held the whip, George's, chapped and weathered, gripped the plough tails. Fred Abel, anxious to get the ploughing done, reminded George that he had £216 rent to pay the Lord (the landlord) every Michaelmas.

George would be satisfied with his twelve shillings a week; he thought, I'll soldier on, it's better than fighting the Boers. 'Ah Jim's a-keeping company with an A'sum girl, he ull marry one

day, happen. Her father has just skated on the Avon from there to Tewkesbury. It has froze solid like,' he explained to the boy, 'and Saturday they roasted a pig on the ice and drove the ponies and A'sum spring carts down the river. This weather's a good gaffer,' he told the boy. 'It does keep us moving, no pleasure to loiter on the headland. Master Abel ull get his ploughing done if the frost baits a bit.'

It abated all right, snow followed and the school mistress reported in her log book: 'School closed for two days owing to snow which fell continually.' Then came the floods and she notes in her book, 'Four children absent owing to flooded fields and roads.' Such a bad week ended with the school mistress absent with severe neuralgia and face pains. On the Monday she reported, 'Many scholars away owing to the meet of the fox-hounds.'

Harry Bowman's children were guilty of absenting themselves because of the meet.

Jim Bowman had been milking Sam Jink's cows, feeding the dry stock all the winter, but he was not settled nor satisfied with his twelve shillings per week like his brother George. Jim had worked for two years at Dumbleton brickyard. To say he had worked puts it mildly—he had *slaved* as he pushed barrow-loads of wet bricks to the kiln from six in the morning until six at night, pushed two-hundredweight loads along narrow planks across the clay from the pug mill. He walked three miles morning and night as a lad of seventeen. If he arrived at the yard at six, taking the bridle path across Carrants Field, Tinkers Hut and Didcot before the steam hooter went, he earned seventeen shillings a week. If the hooter blew before he was in the yard, he was not allowed to start work until lunch-time. Little did the bunch of Ashton's youths know that for that extra five shillings a week they travelled the Roman Saltway each morning, Jim read in his bible of the Israelites under Rome having to make bricks without straw.

The steam-driven pug mill laboured on day after day, consuming the raw material, making great inroads. At the clay pits, where the heron nested, the mallards came in flocks in the

winter and Harry caught the occasional tench with rod and line on Sunday afternoons. The stretch of water at the clay pits was girdled with withies and sweetened by the note of the summer nightingales.

How different Bill Bowman's sons were one from the other. George, a steady bachelor, accepted his lowly place in a poor village, doffed his hat to the parson and Fred Abel, who he called 'Maaster', attended St Barbara's Church regularly, kept every written and unwritten law of the parish. Harry, married to Emma, boasted that however cramped the cottage he reckoned on a christening most years—'It don't do to keep the missus empty for long.' He hated the Church and argued that it was natural for a man of the land to distrust the man in black—a Tory he's bound to be, a landlord of the glebe allotments, an indoor man. Rev Brown heard of Harry's hatred of the Church and called at Land Close one evening to see him. 'Why this suspicion and distrust of me, Bowman?' the parson began as they faced each other, man to man, across the table.

'Well, it's like this,' Harry said in his slow, low voice. 'You be all of the same kidney—the Church and the landlords. Maaster Bostock's a good gaffer but he dare not give me more than twelve shillings a wick, you all got an understanding against the labourer.'

'Come, come, Bowman,' Rev Brown replied, 'we all are knit together in the village. George comes to church, your father and Jim go to chapel, but you will always find them in St Barbara's at Harvest, Easter and such festivals.'

'It's not that I've got anything agant you personally, Parson, it's the set up. You are all tarred with the same brush—Oxford M.A. and all that. You come into a poor parish like ours, talk in the pulpit of spiritual mysteries while my taters in the garden be full of disease like last autumn. I've seen your capers at Christmas along of our gaffer when the partridges didn't rise to the gun.'

The parson laughed. 'You mean up Gypsies Lane?—We must have our lighter side to life, I'd had three funerals that week! What did you see, Bowman?'

'Well, I suppose it's laughable,' Harry said. 'No ill feeling. Like a drop of parsnip wine?'

Rev Brown sipped the crystal-clear wine which Harry poured from the stone jar. 'Not at all bad, Bowman—a nice drink.'

Harry reminded the man in black of the incident. 'We have already agreed,' he said, 'that the partridges didn't rise that day and you nor our gaffer never had a shot from Hill Withy along Carrants Brook to the Big Rails.'

'Correct,' agreed Rev Brown.

'I was working in the Big Rails anant Gypsies Lane and our gaffer said, "Let's throw our hats up in the air and have a shot at them." You cocked your guns but Master Bostock was too smart for you. Only the Reverend's hat went up in the air—that shallow pancake one you wore when you first came here. Our gaffer riddled him with shot—two barrels—and I reckons that he was only fit for the furnace hole when you got back to the vicarage.'

They both laughed and he and Harry came to a sort of gentleman's agreement. As a parting shot, Harry said, 'I looked in Smiths Directory—your stipend is noted in there. Half of it would suit me and the missus.'

In a little brick cottage near the Village Pound lived Jack Alvis and his wife. Jack drove John Bostock's steam-thrashing engine; he reckoned himself a cut above the farm labourers, scuffed his hobnailed boots as he walked the village street, wore a blue cotton engine-driver's jacket, a stiff peaked leather cap. Jack was a knowing sort of chap. The other men at Bostocks—Harry Bowman and Frank Wheatcroft—said that Jack had an extra bob a week wages just for being in the know. Jack kept bees in straw skeps down the garden. He made straw skeps in the back place winter nights. He also made metheglin—a kind of mead—from the honey comb after it had been squeezed through muslin to extract the honey. To be invited to Jack's for a few tots of an evening was an honour any bleak February night. Mrs Alvis stoked a good fire, the hawthorn bough across the dogs blazed through a harder kind of coal than that which sent the smoke through the cottage chimneys, Jack's big frail

basket was filled each morning with fittle, at night with another kind of fittle—black seam coal to feed the fireplace.

Harry and Frank were invited to Alvis's place. They sat the winter evening through, talking of corn and cattle, of wine and women, of club feasts, bonfires up at the Tower or Parsons Folly on Bredon's summit. As they sipped the honey dew from the tots off the mantel, it slipped down like milk—smooth, mild—but how sly. Metheglin of Jack's vintage had no effect on the men from Bostock's Farm, no visible effect that is to say. Their faces shone a bit redder in the firelight and the lamplight, their tongues loosened as confidences were exchanged. Mrs. Alvis dozed off in her wing chair, the men agreed to have just one more before the chill journey to Chandlers and Land Close.

'Good night to ya bwoth,' Jack's voice rang through the frosty air when Ashton slept apart from the screech of owls, the screaming of Bredon's vixen, the bark of the dog fox.

'Good night and God bless ya, Jack, and the missus,' Frank replied at the wicket gate.

Now Ashton village street at this point runs up the hill between two grassy slopes like railway batters. The narrow path runs along the top of the grassy batter on Alvis's side of the road.

'My legs be jewsid queer,' Harry mumbled as he swayed along the path.

'I'll tell tha what,' Frank said, 'we beunt a-gwain to make it tonight!'

'Put the best foot forrad,' one said to the other. 'Our missuses ull tell us our fortune when we gets hwom.'

Frank gave one big sway and went down on the grassy bank. Harry bent to pick him up, falling down like a tree by his side. One or two vain attempts to get up and Harry and Frank spent the night like the hares in the form, like the partridges in the furrow and, like Nature, fell asleep.

Emma Bowman and Mrs. Wheatcroft guessed that the drink had detained them, imagining them on Alvis's rag rug by the fire for the night.

Dawn breaks late over the Cotswolds that time of year, the

nights are long and cold. George Bowman kept Fred Abel's horses in the Little Piece. Before the orange glow of light showed near Broadway Tower, George haltered his team at the Blacksmith's Lane Gate, taking them up the road head to tail to Abel's stable. Prince, the foremost, shied, Diamond the second horse reared up and George shone his lantern towards the roadside grass batter and there he recognised two Ashton men who had slept the night under the stars—warm inside with Alvis's metheglin, but their topcoats covered with white rime frost. Like two soldiers felled in battle they lay, and still they slept until George prodded them with his whipstick and once more life came back into Bostock's men. Just in time for a bite of breakfast, then back to work on Ashton's clay.

CHAPTER THREE

MARCH

ONE WEEKEND early in the month Mary Ann was reading the *Journal* to Bill Bowman, the war in Africa her chief topic. 'Yer, Bill,' she said, 'listen to this—Welsh Fusilier Hampton from one of the Bredon Hill villages writes home—"As we landed at Port Elizabeth, Cape Colony, there was such a swarm of locusts that one of his Company remarked—'I say Ben, everything's in khaki in this blooming country, even the butterflies be wearing it'." '

Bill laughed. His mind went back to wars when he was a youth and with a twinkle in his eye he added, 'Our Generals unt so stupid now as to dress the men in red jackets as could be spotted a mile away—but read on, Mother.'

'I've kept the best bit until last, same as they kept the best wine until last at Cana in the Bible. Ladysmith a bin relieved by Lord Roberts and General Crogie is a prisoner.'

'Ashton boys be safe?'

'Ah, they ull be all right, I prays for um every night,' Mary Ann said—'and Willum, it's time we was going up the wooden hill.'

'Dalled if it unt nine o'clock, I'll wind the clock up.'

'You and your clock,' Mary Ann smiled.

'That clock does more than tell the time.'

'I know what you be driving at,' Mary Ann said.

Bill raised his voice to be heard as he pulled the small weight on the winding chain until the big weight lay just under the dial—'You means it gets rid of late visitors when they stops until nine o'clock. I just opens the front door halfway like after I've wound up our timepiece and says "I'll wish you good night" to visitors whoever they be, and out they goes when I adds "I be just off to bed".'

Down at the village school the Governess, as she was called,

was encouraged by the improvement in attendance, arranging for scholars who wished to obtain a Certificate of Proficiency to go to Elmley Castle for the exam on March 11th. An outbreak of measles cancelled this and the scholars went instead to Bricklehampton.

Jim Bowman came home one evening from Sam Jinks's cowshed looking worried as he fingered his twelve-shilling wages. 'I'm wasting my life at Bumbo,' he said. 'Tied to the cow's tail. Dumbleton brickyard proved I could work with the next, I can see money and a future in market gardening.'

'Don't let we old uns hold ya back, bwoy,' his mother said—'that's if you want to make more.'

'It's A'sum where there's more money,' Jim answered, 'and I've saved a few pounds to buy a motor-bike.'

'A motor-bike?' Bill stammered. 'Fust a phonograph and now a motor-bike.'

That week, Jim arranged to leave Sam Jinks and his cows and bought a secondhand motor-bike—a Bradbury, a heavy machine with a battery on the pillion as a spare and another one to give the ignition. He rode to A'sum, cap reversed and called on Mr Percy Pitcher at the Gas Works for a job. 'It's a night job I want, Mr Pitcher. Can you offer anything?' 'Yes, my boy—stoker, stoking the retorts. Eighty hours a week for a pound.' 'Right,' said Jim, 'I start straightaway.'

So night after night Jim laboured, shovelling ten tons of coal, his bare hands blistering to the shovel, the long night hours and the heat and the hard labour giving him a sense of drowsiness each time he stopped to sit a minute on the bench to swig the oatmeal water from the bottle. But a pound a week after only twelve shillings at Bumbo! As night turned to day Jim pushed his motor-bike down Mill Bank until the smoke billowed from the exhaust. Jim jumped on the saddle as the engine came to life, then over the Workman Bridge towards White Hart Cottage at Ashton.

On those March mornings Bill listened under his damson tree for the roar of Ashton's only motor-bike as it could be heard turning at the Turnpike, then over the Midland Railway Bridge

for the village. After breakfast Jim slept until dinner time but he couldn't rest. He walked down the Back Lane to the family allotment in Carrants Field where, owing to his father's ill health, the corn grew green on the whole of the acres. No early gilly flowers, no spring cabbage—just corn. Nothing at all for the donkey and cart to take to market.

All right for the present, he thought. George—he's content, carter for Fred Abel. He will cut and stook the corn no doubt and rick it in the plough yard with the other allotment men. But sprouts, I see, are seven and ninepence a pot in A'sum market, more than half a week's wages at Abel's.

The March winds blew, drying the land. The Governess complained in her log book of children staying away from school and working on the allotments.

Jim had not been many weeks in the Gas Works stoke hole before he heard of an A'sum gardener giving up land at Bull Furrow at Klondike. Heavy sticky land but land planted with strawberries and asparagus. He paid the ingoing for the planted crops and rented it. So, after nights stoking the retorts, Jim dug up the straight alleys of asparagus, hoed the strawberries by day. Just an hour's sleep at dinner time and a nod by the retorts when he had slaved for an hour or so and filled the gaping holes. How did he keep awake those March nights? When he had dozed awhile and the pressure gauges fell, he slid off the bench, dipped his head in a bucket of cold water and mechanically, as if by instinct, he shovelled, shovelled, shovelled coal. Black as a miner he worked with choking coal dust, inhaling sulphur fumes instead of the fresh clean air of Bredon Hill.

Sundays, away from the land, away from the Gas Works, Jim threw in his lot with the Salvation Army, learning to play a sousaphone. His motor-bike took him from Ashton to the Barracks in the Leys at A'sum. Tea at the little greengrocer's in Port Street with William and Emma Eastwood and their youngest daughter Catherine. Jim and Catherine's courtship had already been going on three years. Marriage was out of the question. 'Not until I'm on my feet,' Jim said, 'until then it's work, night and day for me.' Catherine understood, helped him

in the evenings on his land after working as a seamstress all day, supporting the Army in the fight against evil, against poverty. Catherine signed the Temperance Pledge but as Jim told the Eastwoods, 'We are not trying to rob the working man of his pint. It's our way of life.' On Wednesdays Catherine attended the Band of Hope where the company of likeminded folk met socially and sang such songs as:

I like with a friend an hour to pass,
I'm very fond of a social glass
But it must be filled with water.
Water, pure doth brighter shine
Than brandy, gin or sparkling wine
Sad is the fix if the liquor you mix,
You never do that, nor I, nor I.
Water, bright water, bright
From the crystal stream...

No hunting the fox on Bredon's slopes for Jim, and in fact very few Ashton folk had either the time or the wherewithal to hunt.

Mary Ann read two things to Bill on these dark March evenings—the Bible and the *Journal*. 'A long chase over Bredon,' she read from the weekly paper. 'The Croome Hunt met at Cropthorne New Inn on Saturday last. They drew Hollands Gorse, the dog fox took a line to Hinton Roughs keeping straight with the wind in his brush to Netherton Brake, bearing left to Ashton Wood then leading the pack up Bredon to the Long Plantation.'

'Oi,' Bill interrupted, 'them larches and silver birches up thur on the flat be got some useful timber nowadays.'

'From here,' Mary Ann explained as Bill's mind wavered over that familiar plateau, 'they went down Hill Common in Overbury Wood.'

'I'll bet they lost reynard in thur among the brier...'

'Listen will ya.' Mary Ann continued. 'He doubled back crossing his own scent to Grafton firs.'

''Specs Oliver Hampton had stopped the earths thur.'

'They must have, 'cause he come back again to Elmley deer park, to Doctors Wood, Battens Wood across the top again to the Folly and down to Wollas Hall, down to Bredons Norton withy beds.'

'I know,' spoke up Bill, 'where they makes the pot hampers out of the osiers.'

Mary Ann was used to such interruptions and read on how the fox, the Croome pack, the horsemen, once more mounted the steep western slopes of Bredon, back to Battens Wood near Elmley Park, where, it reported 'The One went to ground in some strong earths.'

'Not many dry hairs on the huntsmen's 'osses, I'll warrant,' Bill sighed.

'Bredon's the very devil to ride up and down so many times. Mind,' he said, 'the old hands, the feow farmers as knows the hill well, when they got atop would view the pack from there, not winding their 'osses to come up again, come up the steep slope where the Banbury Stone stands high over the Avon Valley. Who was among the followers, Mary Ann? Lord Coventry would be Master.'

'Oh thur was the Coles, the Bagnalls, the Bostocks, the Overbury families—just a moderate turn out!'

Ah, thought Bill, it's near the end of the season, they don't run the in-whelp vixen any more.

That day the school Governess at Ashton wrote in her log book: 'Very poor attendance after dinner due to the hounds passing through Ashton Wood.' Harry Bowman's family heard the music, left their dinner plates to follow the pack as Harry had done years before—a natural thing to do when excitement was as rare as sweat on a roadman.

The Governess had learnt to accept this sort of thing—that country boys and girls loved the sound of the horn and the music of the hounds better than doh, ray, me, fah, so, la, te, doh on her piano. Miss Brown had been teaching in Ashton long enough to know how diverse, how odd the village schoolchildren, indeed, the village folk's taste for music was. The church's pedal organ was a poor substitute for the old village

orchestra which once played in the balcony. The chapel's harmonium suited the addicts of Moody and Sankey. Alderton's Brass Band on Club Day stirred the hobnailed labourers to march up the village street. Bill Wheatcroft (Frank's brother) played his melodion, his tin whistle, on the village cross. Jim Bowman slid the wax cylinders of magic on to the revolving drum of his phonograph, producing for his parents military marches, the Double Eagle, and so forth. The bells, all five, rang regularly but sounded better from a distance. On Bredon Hill, Sunday mornings, they mingled with the other hill church ringers from Beckford to Elmley. They sang at the pubs on Saturday nights and George Bowman sang deep and low behind the plough when the work went well and the weather was pleasant—an acre in a day on Abel's clays as the boy, whip in hand, walked the stubble to the sound of George's 'We've all ploughed an acre, I'll swear and I'll vow, we're all jolly fellas who follow the plough'.

The notes of Jim's Salvation Army sousaphone were a little too much for Bill Bowman and Mary Ann to endure in the small White Hart Cottage. He practised his music sitting on a pig bench in the shed where the donkey cart had been kept. Here at the end of the long garden, notes were played which came somewhere near the music in front of him. Jim had to learn and as Bill Bowman stood under the budding damson tree he told him, 'That unt music, it's more like the noise of a pig hung on a gate.' Then, as the low notes seeped through the shed door he remarked again as he returned to the house, ' 'Tis like a bumble bee in a churn.'

But as March went by from day to day, the dawn chorus of birds rang through Ashton Wood, nesting thrushes and black birds sang on budding hawthorn and larks sang in the clear air.

'Never come March, Never come winter' the old folk said as flurries of snow powdered the hedgerows—ewe-eaning snow they called it, coming and going quick as the morning dew.

It's strange how the old folk lived to see the bursting bud and hear the rising lark after a tedious winter, then just as spring

was round the corner 'popped off' as Bill Bowman called it. Bill was always sad to hear the passing bell when one of his generation had put his tools away for the last time or some village woman had done her last week's washing. Sarah Tomkins, Snobby Tomkins the shoemaker's wife, died that early spring. Snobby walked the mile to Grafton to see Albert Bowman, a relative of Bill Bowman's. Albert, wheelwright and undertaker, also made a drop of good cider. Snobby arrived at his house and before he could tell Albert his business was asked, as was the custom, to have a horn of cider. The two sat in the kitchen, two old friends sitting either side the jug on the kitchen table.

'Have another, Snobby, it ull warm ya afore you walks the foot path to Ayshon.'

'Oi, I don't mind another, this is a drop of good.'

Albert told him how he had got a fresh emptied rum barrel to put his cider in, how he heaped the fruit under the trees until late autumn before he made the drink. The apples gain sugar that way, as mangolds do. The clock ticked away until it struck eight and then nine and Snobby thought, 'Best be on my way home.' As he left he thought of his errand.

'Oh, dall it, I very near forgot! Ull you make me a box to put the missus in, her died this morning. No need to measure, her's five foot two inches.'

When Albert told Bill Bowman the story he understood. Snobby thought the world of his wife but was overcome by the shock of losing her.

Rev Grant conducted the funeral, George and Harry Bowman were among the bearers. It was quite a usual thing for men like these to carry the coffin, push the bier, just for a drink and feed after. This is exactly what happened at Sarah Tomkins' funeral. John Bostock, Harry's boss, didn't stop anything out of his wages for the afternoon off. On Saturday he took from his pocket his leather purse with the ring and string and gave him the usual half sovereign and a florin. Now George's boss, Fred Abel, was a tenant farmer and Bostocks owned the land. Fred was hard pressed for money, his half-year's rent would be due on Lady Day, March 25th. When George Bowman grumbled at

a cut in his wage for carrying at the funeral, Fred Abel called him into the kitchen and read out this tenancy agreement.

On the table the legal document was spread out like a stiff parchment. 'You listen to this,' said Fred.

'Fred Abel's agreement between Herbert Drew, Solicitor, Edgar Robinson of Swansea, Surgeon, called the Lords and Fred Abel called the Tenant.

'The Lords reserve the right to take away timber, minerals, clay bricks and quarry stone. To shoot and sport on the estate. The landlords will charge to the tenant ten pounds for every acre of turf broken or ploughed up. Ten pounds for every acre of grassland twice mown in a season. Ten pounds for every timber tree or sapling cut down by the tenant. For every cart load of hay, straw or turnips or other roots or green crops, dung or compost soil or sand soil off the farm the tenant to pay the Lords five pounds.

'The rent due at Michaelmas £210 per annum but by agreement may be paid in two instalments, one at Lady Day.

'Mr Fred Abel to reside on the farm personally to keep together all fixtures except main timbers, roofs and thatched roofs.

'The tenant to keep in good repair all doors, gates, walls, bars, ponds, culverts, drains, pumps, wells, dams, ditches, gutters.

'Once a year brush trim hedges, plash or layer when required.

'Iron work to be painted with best oil paint, two coats one year in five. Tar or varnish all woodwork.

'The Lords allowing timber, bricks and lime, the tenant the cartage of same. The tenant to cultivate the farm in the local way of husbandry. To break no pasture, not to have white straw crops two successive years. Not to grow tares, mustard, rape, turnips or any exhausting crop except for his own use, then no more than one acre. Conserve all fodder on the farm, lime the land when required.

'Preserve all game, rabbits, wild fowl, and fish for the Lords. To allow the Lords to prosecute poachers.

'Not to let off any herbage or agist keep for cattle.'

'Well, Gaffer,' sighed George, 'I can see as you got to mind your Ps and Qs.'

Fred Abel looked at George Bowman like a father. 'You ull learn, George boy, these legal and professional gentlemen wants their pound of flesh. Last week however they had a look around the farm and I have asked for £15 reduction in rent on account of the rickyard wall being shaky. They went around the cottagers as sub-lets their houses. Dan Lampitt wasn't at home but his wife asked for new paving stones and repairs to the privy roof. Josey Bradfield as pays four pound ten rent a year wants a furnace put in the outhouse and repairs to the thatch which was damaged by the gale and lets in the rain. Charlie Bradfield's spouting leaks and there's a few tiles off the roof ridge. Joseph Burns has been in his place twenty-seven years. He told them that the back kitchen needs plastering and the yard paving. The last one they visited was John Alvis as drives the steam engine at threshing.'

George looked thoughtfully at his employer saying, 'What the hell has he got to worrit about?'

'Oh, just a new pan for the closet—nothing much,' Fred concluded.

'It unt all honey a-renting property, Gaffer,' George observed. 'I'll do my best for you six days a wick.'

'That's the spirit, lad, now for a drop of cider,' and giving George a jug and the cellar key he told him to help himself. 'But you can see that we shall have to thrash that other wheat rick before Lady Day,' and with these words Fred Abel folded the agreement, putting it away inside his roll-top desk.

As the March mornings lightened a little earlier, flurries of windborne dust passed the door of Abel's stable. The yarded cattle slept on a drier bed; the straw had not been soaked by the rain for a week or so. The shoulder-high remnant of the straw rick resembled a new house built window-frame high. Fred Abel, leaning on the yard gate, told George not to be stingy with the bedding straw for the cattle. 'A dry spring,' he said, 'and we shan't make more yard muck without it comes a quiltch of rain. Now about this threshing, George. I've seen John Bostock and his big engine is difficult to manoeuvre up into our rickyard, it will take about eight horses to pull it there.'

'What about Master Crump's tack from Grafton?' George suggested. 'His light portable engine ull do the job a treat.'

'Are you busy tonight then?' Fred enquired as he knocked his pipe out on the bottom asp of the double stable door. 'If not, go and see John Crump at the Manor Farm. Tell him I be obliged if he could do our thrashing of the last wheat rick. Come to think of it, his tackle is in the yard at the Plough where they thrashed the allotment ricks.'

Every autumn and winter the Plough yard was like an Indian village—little thatched ricks like Indian huts scattered around. They varied in size according to the size of the Ashton allotment holders' strips of corn, three waggon loads in the big ones down to one waggon load in the smallest. If the smallholder had not enough corn cut by his hook and crook to make a waggon load, he shared a rick with his neighbours. Neighbours knew by the tie of the sheaf, as the layers of sheaves were put through the thrasher, when they started thrashing another man's corn. All worked together at this communal thrash when everyone's corn was kept separate; when the feeder of the thrashing drum swept through the gaping hole all the chaff, all the shed corn off the top of the drum until no more grain came down the chutes into the sacks. This was in a very small way co-operative farming. It had to be. It takes seven men's labour to satisfy a thrashing machine. There was rough music at the Plough until the thrashing drum hum died away, with the raking up of the chaff, the carting of the sacks of wheat, loads of straw. George Bowman made his way that night to Grafton. As he walked up Lenchwick Lane he smacked his lips knowing full well that the crock jug would come full of cider from the cellar as soon as he met Master Crump.

'You're just in time George,' Master Crump said. 'We are going to put away the tackle soon for the season. How much does Mr Abel want done?'

'About a day's thrash I'd say, Gaffer, we be expecting pretty well a hundred sacks.'

'Right, I'll send your cousin Chot Bowman over and no doubt if you had a word with Albert the carpenter and wheel-

wright ('and undertaker,' butted in George) he would give a hand.'

Back at Ashton next morning as George gave the horses their morning bait, Mr Abel told him to muster a gang for thrashing. 'Let me see,' he counted on his fingers, 'there's you and me and Albert, we want four more—John Bostock, I'd better see him myself, he's a bit of an autocrat.'

'A *what*, Gaffer?'

'Well, they was gentry who have come down a peg but John's all right if you call him "Sir".'

Old Snobby Tomkins agreed to come if he didn't have to carry the chaff and young Spud Jackson from the Wood would take a day off school to carry water for the engine. He was not the only boy who stayed away from school that day. The news got around that Mr Abel was thrashing his last rick. The village boys cut nut sticks from the rickyard hedge—rat-killing sticks. They stood by Hulses sundial in age groups. The girls, giggling girls, were looking forward to being chased by the boys with their pockets full of mice and pink bald young rats from the ricks, then the inevitable tumble in the straw.

George's face took on a worried look. He hoped for Mr Abel's sake that the weather would keep fine until the rick was finished and cast a good yield of grain. He started early from the stable with three of his best horses to haul the four-ton engine up the bank into Abel's rickyard. He put Prince in fillers gears to go in the shafts of the Ransome Simms and Jeffries engine, the other two horses in long gears or trace harness. Harry Bowman followed with three of Bostock's team to pull the thrashing drum, this left big-kneed Dick in Abel's stable. Young Spud Jackson put an old cart saddle on him after the stable had been picked of its best horse flesh and harness. He made up the harness the best he could by fitting false togs to body hames and so on. Spud had to fetch the straw tier—it wasn't heavy, just a necessary extra to complete the caravan of thrashing tackle.

Chot Bowman was first to arrive in the rickyard with Bertie Robinson in John Crump's horse and trap. Bertie was one of the few hatless workers on the farm. Bent, bald and bronze-headed

from the summer's heat and wind and rain, he worked almost mechanically. As he scanned the rick, ash plant in hand, his back remained bent—only his eyes raised high enough to see the squat, steeple-shaped roof where Frank Wheatcroft and Fred Abel were already drawing out the rick pegs from the thatch now white with frost. It always froze when the thrasher came, concreting the rickyard mud and freezing the horse pond.

'If they aren't soon here with that thrasher,' Snobby exclaimed for all to hear, 'this rick won't go through by tay time.'

'Depends on the men,' Bertie answered. 'Snobby, what sort av staff av you got?'

'We got another boy, Syd Jackson, Mr Abel said that it was advisable to have an extra hand at thrashing.'

Snobby looked at John and knew that Spud was on the way with the straw tier, his moustache curled askew. He knew that John would carry the chaff and Spud the water for the engine.

'Most on us be hardworking chaps but there be the specials,' he grunted. 'Udn't have um on the ground if I was gaffer.'

Frank, astride the top of the rick, shouted, 'Get ready, yer comes Puffing Billy,' and sure enough around the corner came George's team heading the caravan of noisy traffic as wheels of iron, wheels of wood hooped with iron tyres bounced from pot-hole to pot-hole. Ironwork rattled, timbers creaked, horses snorted steam from their nostrils clouding the frosty air, Spud bringing up the rear with big-kneed Dick pulling the straw tier. What a picture as George brought his team to a halt under the leafless elms at the entrance to the rickyard, puffing a Woodbine as he walked alongside his standing horses, plough whip hung around his neck, frail food basket on Diamond, the foremost horse's harness. With the gentle weight of his hand on mullen or bridle rein, he told them in turn. 'Hold back,' as the tension was released from the traces and the collar fell forward slightly off their sweaty shoulder. Then, and then only, could the filler, or shaft horse, stand back half a pace to rest in his breeching strap.

As Bertie walked down the cart track, he stood bent, close to George, a square, shorter man, a typical Bowman. Their faces met and no words were exchanged as Bertie led Diamond in an

arc so that George leading Prince, the filler, brought the engine with chimney stack down squarely through the gateway. The horses seemed to know that four tons of ironwork lay behind those shafts.

'Cup, Diamond,' George shouted as he straightened for the incline. 'Het, Boxer,' the middle chestnut horse, he orders as Boxer tried in vain to cut the corner.

By now, Bertie had positioned his engine on the far side of the rick.

'Bring the threshing drum when thee bist ready,' Chot Bowman shouts to Bostock's waggoner waiting with his team. Spud left big-kneed Dick shafted in the straw, then grabbed the mullen rein of Bostock's foremost horse and drew the machine alongside the unthrashed rick.

Then came the ritual of unsheeting the thrasher, uncoiling the huge leather driving-belt. Spud walked back and found his Dick, outcast of the stable, nodding off almost to sleep beneath the bearable weight, the taut ridge chain bearing down in the metal channel of the cart saddle.

'Cup, Dick, look lissom,' Spud hollored. The straw tier chackled over the cobbles turning a half circle as Spud shouted again, 'Hold back,' bearing on Dick's mullen rein until the tier was just near enough to the shakers of the thresher to fix the driving chain between the cogs, cogs with gaping teeth, on thresher and tier. The little gang then buckled to, putting wooden wedge-shaped scauts under wheels while Bertie took a pair of steel-rimmed glasses from his waistcoat pocket and read the spirit level as other men jacked up the drum until the little bubble, the telltale bubble, lay dead centre in that dusty glass instrument which Bertie said told the 'certin truth'. Chot slipped the leather driving-belt on the great driving-wheel of his engine on to the small pulley-wheel of the thresher. George, with his shaft horse, manoeuvred the engine until the endless belt of solid leather was taut enough to drive from the engine to the thresher pulley-wheel. Half a hogshead barrel was rolled alongside the steam engine and the hose pipe from the boiler dropped into the upturned tub.

'Now then, you bwoys,' Fred Abel shouted from the rick to Spud and young Jackson, 'fill up the barrel from the horse pond.'

'Buckets, Master Abel, where be um?'

'Bless the bwoy, it's all in the barn, buckets and yokes. Look smartish let's have some water.'

Chot broke hard steam-coal with his hammer, throwing the shining cobbles into the fire-box. The fire, still warm from yesterday's threshing, soon glowed and before long thirty pounds pressure showed on the gauge of steam. When sixty showed, Chot blew the steam whistle startling the boys and waking Dick who still stood like a seaside donkey where he was left under the clover rick.

As Chot opened the regulator and set the wheels in motion, the governor knobs, brass and shining, rose and fell and puffs of smoke belched up the chimney stack. The leather belt turned the drum but Bertie noticed a slop now and again on the pulley.

'Too much slack, Chot,' he shouted. 'Stop the engine.'

Before the pulleys had quite stopped, Bertie pulled the belt clear of them with a peg of wood and the belt snaked and coiled on the rickyard floor.

'We ull soon odds that,' he said and he inched the place in the belt where the raw leather thunks, or thongs, joined it, shoe-lace fashion.

'Best take him up half an inch,' Chot observed, and in no time at all Chot started the wheels going and the belt rang tight and true.

Chot then mounted the little ladder, short shuppick in hand, into the drum. He was to feed the machine regularly with the ears of the corn all one way so that the straw boltings came out straight and tidy. The gang took up their positions for work, changing around sometimes to relieve the monotony. Albert Bowman followed Chot on to the drum as the engine's throttle was knocked open by the horny palm of Bertie's hand.

Just another day for him and Chot but a special day for the other men. Snobby hooked the four-bushel sacks under the grain chutes. As the great flywheel on the engine gathered

speed, it was difficult to keep pace with the laced join in the driving belt as it whipped past the pulley. The smaller belts drove smaller pulleys shaking riddles, blowing dust, dust from the last farm, around the yard.

'Let's have up,' shouted Chot, his voice barely heard among the din, the moan, the chackle of the threshing machine. Fred Abel and Frank Wheatcroft pitched the sheaves to Albert who cut the strings, dropping the cut wheat at Chot's feet. As the first corn went through the emptiness of the drum, the empty moan of more, more, more was broken by the sound of the grain being separated; a sound, as every sheaf went through, like hail-stones on a glass roof or dry sticks buring in the hedge bottom. The riddles and the fans blew the chaff for young Bradfield to carry in sheetfuls to the barn. Tom Bowman pitched the straw boltings to his brother Harry who started a rick of straw. Spud, yoked to his buckets, carried water for the engine. Snobby Tomkins minded the sacks, wheeled them on a sack cart to the granary where he weighed each one two hundredweight and a quarter. Chot and Albert Bowman made a fine pair on the drum; Chot in greyish-blue cotton jacket fed the machine evenly, Albert stood awaiting the sheaves, his hooked, black horn-handled knife, a shut knife, he occasionally rubbed gently on a short piece of whetstone from his pocket. Albert was a craftsman in wood-wheels, coffins and ladders. A day's thresh-ing for him was just a day to work with his brother and his Ashton cousins.

'We be a man short, Gaffer,' George Bowman called to Mr Abel. 'Two can't manage the straw.'

Just then Joe Bradfield, Bostock's shepherd, arrived—'Over-slept' he said as he started to help with the straw. The different approach to the work was interesting. Frank Wheatcroft, for instance, brought his own shippuck with a larch stale or handle fixed and ferruled into blacksmith's made iron prongs. Frank liked a comfortable tool, he rubbed linseed oil on the stale regu-larly and fresh liquor (unsalted lard) on his hands to prevent chapping.

As the drum hummed so the odd grain of wheat flew as if

shot by catapult into Chot's face. He had developed a set look with half-closed eyes as he stared continually at the gaping mouth of the machine where dust rose as dense and choking as smoke from the engine's stack. Men who had experienced this year in, year out said few words—just looked at each other understandingly. If they spoke it was with cupped hand to mouth straight into their team-mate's ear. The din of the whole thing resounded over the village.

As occasionally Chot dropped the unparted sheaf straight into the drum, 'woof' went the machine, the governors opened on the engine, the black smoke shot skywards like a rocket but the power stored in the flywheel in the steam cylinder was more than enough to cope. Bertie looked disapprovingly from the footplate where he had been feeding the fire-box with coal from the near-by stack. Then as if ignoring Chot's misjudgment, he walked circling the whole outfit with his long-spouted oil can which spurted cobalt-blue liquid at every press of his thumb on the knob. The cogs, the pulleys, the bearings, had their regular dose. Brass bushes shone like gold at every squirt of the can 'Oils chupper than bearings,' he muttered as if to excuse himself for the drops which fell from some saturated cog into the chaff.

As Spud struggled with his yoke and buckets, he asked Bertie how much coal the engine would burn.

'Depends,' said Bertie as his eyes rose to young Spud's level. 'Five hundredweight a day is the usual.'

Syd Jackson raked the chaff from under the drum with a new rake Mr Abel had brought back in the pony trap from A'sum. The broken straw or rowins, Syd and Spud moved between them to a near-by shed in sacking sheets, the same as the chaff sheets, grasping the corners as one gave a bob up into the other's back. Of all the threshers, apart from Bertie, Spud and Syd were the only ones who could stand and stare at times, the others in the team worked like clockwork.

Boys who are idle a few minutes soon find mischief to do and Spud and Syd were no exception. 'Let's go and see old Snobby,' Spud said. 'Thee start him agoing.'

There was no need, for the minute Snobby saw them he

sniffed in contempt saying, 'Yur comes the specials.' Snobby was busy, the wheat ran well down and as he took each sack off the machine he wheeled it on a sack cart, walking backwards and ducking under the moving driving-belt, into the granary. Then into the deadweight weighing-machine two hundredweight and a quarter in each sack. A pretty good guesser was Snobby but if the sack was overweight he scooped a little out with a bowl into the bushel measure near-by.

'Ain't you jumping chaps got nothing to do but stare at me?' he asked Spud and Syd.

'Don't you think Snobby's getting past it?' Syd said, just loud enough for the sack man to hear.

'Past it?' he straightened his back. 'Out of my bloomin' road, you two fellas.'

Then Snobby told the boys what they had come for, Snobby's opinion of the youth of the day. 'If I was gaffer I udn't have you two gentlemen on the ground if you ud work for nothing. Work,' he said. 'You don't know what it is, I suppose you have read that book *Work and How to Dodge it*.'

Spud said, 'Now Snobby, won't your hand tremble when you fetches your wage packet on Saturday? Be you worth the money and the gaffer's good cider?' The boys then sang in the granary, out of Mr Abel's hearing, the first line of 'Drink to me Only with thine eyes'.

' 'Tis on some music hall stage you two ought to be, not along with honest working men in a good gaffer's rickyard!'

At that moment Frank Wheatcroft passed to have a swig at the cider, filling his mug from the nine-gallon barrel in the granary.

'Take no notice on um, Snobby, they ull learn when they have sin the sun rise over Broadway Hill as many times as thee and me.'

At ten o'clock the top half of the rick's spire had been pitched through the thresher by Mr Abel and Frank, Tom Bowman had pitched the straw boltings to his brother Harry, and Joe Bradfield, shepherd for Bostock's, had taken over the building of the rick until it stood waist-high. Snobby's sacks were stacked in

two rows on the granary floor, Spud and Syd had built two pyramids of chaff and rowins in the barn and cart shed, Spud keeping the water butt at least half full. When Bertie blew the whistle of steam, Chot raked the remains of the last cut sheaf down into the drum and he and Albert climbed down the little ladder. As Bertie knocked the regulator to slow to stop, the belt slowed down, the tune of the drum sang a lower note. The small belt of the fans crept to a standstill, the engine let off her surplus steam from her valves and only wisps of smoke ambled from the chimney stack. The whole rickyard was so quiet that once more men's voices could be heard. Speaking naturally the men sat in the granary eating their bait on Snobby's sacks of corn as they stood in lines as straight as church pews. The cider, cloudy and rough, ran from the trammed and tapped barrel into the crude earthenware mugs, into the drinking horns.

Mr Abel walked in munching a thumbpiece of bread and cheese and counted the sacks. Breeched and gaitered he took samples out of sacks at random into a little cotton bag. The bag was to be collected by Charlie Booth, the postman, as he made his evening return journey to Tewkesbury. The samples went to Healings' mill.

As if he had followed the thrasher by scent, Scottie ambled into the granary lunch room. Scottie, of no fixed abode, was walking the road from Tewkesbury through the village, the pack of his wordly goods fastened to his back, his enamel mug banging against his thigh. This one-time ship's engineer who had crossed the Atlantic so many times, would be dossing down in the bothy over the stable, or 'tallet' as Shepherd Bradfield preferred to call it. Snobby and the shepherd talked of cast, or yield, of grain while Fred Abel, putting a shippuck into Scottie's hand said, 'Take over from me on the rick after bait, I've got the cattle to feed on the hill.' Scottie smiled as he exclaimed, 'I haird the drum, 'tis music to be sure,' and this upright, wholesome-looking gentleman of the road, smart to a degree with waxed moustache, took the pitchfork. Gambling had put the engineer on the road as a traveller. He loved Burns, Shakespeare, indeed anything poetical. 'If music be the food of love,

play on,' he recited from the Bard of Avon's *Twelfth Night*.

'We be glad to see tha,' Snobby welcomed him, 'but for the Lord's sake don't thee talk of music. Them two useless craters, as I've said before I udn't employ um, have bin cawing away like a couple of old crows "Drink to me only" in my yurs. I'll go to Hanover if they ant very nigh charmed me to death.'

'It's just that Snobby has got past it,' said Syd to Spud as side by side they sat on the sacks. Scottie's mischievous blue eyes twinkled, his clay pipe puffed faster and, humouring Snobby, he turned on the boys.

'Respect age,' he said. 'Ye should understand that grey hairs are not to be ashamed of.'

While men and boys refreshed themselves at bait in the granary, flocks of sparrows gleaned the rickyard of the fallen grain and fed off the top of the machine, and Fred Abel's oldest white Wyandot cock led a few selected hens from the orchard to scratch under the drum. Chaff fled in all directions and the rooster and the laying hens searched for delicacies among the chaff and dust—a few grains of charlock seed, fat hen, even insects disturbed from the winter quarters.

Back in the granary, tots, mugs, enamel cups were put away, spotted kerchiefs empty of the bread and cheese were folded, time it was to start again as Bertie blew the steam whistle. 'No half an hour and five minutes today.' Spud turned to Shepherd Bradfield who brought a bag of humbugs out of his waistcoat pocket with a word to the boys, 'Now stick one of them in your gob and let's have less talking and more work.'

Snobby turned to the shepherd. 'If them two grows up to be as straightforward as thee and me regarding time-keeping they won't be far wrong.'

The shepherd choked over his last mouthful of food, winked at Snobby, looked at the boys and wiped his tobacco-stained moustache and walked back to his post in the rickyard observing, 'they beunt dry behind their yurs yet,' Snobby adding, 'When a babby's born they must in general smack their ass to make um cry. I reckon the midwife smacked the wrong end a them two customers.' So the moaning tone of the thresher

reached its top note, growing once more from the low hum to full steam.

The little boys with nut sticks, little boys who should have been at school, stood in a circle around the rick with Fred Abel's dogs, the village dogs, awaiting escaping rats and mice. Daring boys carried live mice and drowned them in the water butt. Awkward boys stood on the ears of corn while Frank Wheatcroft swore under his breath as he tried to pitch the sheaves to Scottie who had taken Fred Abel's place on the rick's edge. 'Dall your pelts,' he said. 'Get off the sheaves, I don't want to have to lift thee on my shippuck pulling thee out by the hair of the yud.'

As Scottie longed for dinner-time to recharge his clay pipe, Bertie primed the fire-box of the engine, feeding coal with a long-handled shovel. Then poor old Snobby had a mishap. One sack he hooked beneath the grain spout had a hole in the side and wheat poured through the hole cascading on to the rick-yard floor. He spotted it (a bit late) and screwing up some straw he mended the hole with what was known as a farmer's patch. By now half a bushel of corn lay under the drum. Snobby was wheeling the sacks off faster now as Fred Abel had another spell pitching, making three men on the rick. At that moment Mr Abel came off the rick to again count the sacks in the granary, to lift a bolting or two of straw and judge the weight. Then it happened! As Fred came around the corner of the drum to Snobby's end of the machine, putting his hand under the grain spout and biting the grain between his teeth, milling it to make sure it was free of crow onions (wild onions whose seed the millers always sniffed for lest it should taint the bread), Mr Abel saw half a bushel of his best wheat under the drum on the rickyard floor. 'Good gracious, Snobby, what a mess!' was Fred's comment. Snobby grunted 'Busted bag' which got the reply, 'Clear it up then when you have a minute to spare and get the men on the drum to put it through the machine again.' He and Bertie then went into the granary where they topped up the sacks of wheat, catching hold of each sack by the bottom corner, laying it across their other arm and then hands clasped together

bobbing one sack on top of the other making room in the granary for all the grain.

As Spud and Syd passed Snobby, Syd with chaff, Spud with water, they stood a few seconds near the running grain looking on the floor and said in unison, 'Good gracious, Snobby, what a mess.'

Now if Snobby had had a bowl or bushel measure handy, he would have thrown it, but he just bit his grey-moustached upper lip saying, 'I suppose that's all you specials ull have to say all day now. Still, while thee bist a-plaguing me, thee bist a leaving anyone else alone.'

'It's all right, Snobby,' Spud spoke up and Syd fetched the bushel measure from the granary and with Spud's two water buckets they scooped up the upset grain putting it in the bushel measure, then shooting it into an empty sack. Spud carried the partly filled sack of grain and chaff up the short ladder and emptied it into the drum to go through the machine once again.

Snobby was grateful and surprised and giving both boys humbugs said, 'But some mothers do have occud kids.'

As Mr Abel watched the straw rick grow and the corn rick get smaller he knew that by five o'clock the grain would be safe in the granary and the threshed straw rick would be finished, the rats killed and, in fact, the threshing of the rick complete.

At a quarter to four, George Bowman signalled among the din to Mr Abel that he would have to feed the yearling heifers and suckle the calves, milk the house cow, and so Bertie replaced him working on the straw. Fred Abel swopped places with Albert Bowman and cut the sheaf bonds.

'Let's have um, Albert,' Mr Abel shouted above the hum of the thresher, his fingers twitching as he held the bond-cutting knife and suddenly the whole process of threshing took on a sense of urgency. Frank tossed sheaves to Scottie, Scottie tossed to Albert, while Albert kept Mr Abel busy cutting the strings. The clockwork motion of Fred Abel's bond cutting, always a sheaf in front of Chot feeding the drum, made the grain run faster for Snobby. The straw boltings were kicked out quicker by the trusser. The chaff, the rowins, cascaded from the riddles

and rats tried vainly to escape as dogs and boys killed them as soon as they showed themselves. After a while, Bertie left Harry Bowman and the shepherd to cope with the straw for a few minutes while he stoked up the engine, opening the throttle as far as it would go as more steam, more smoke drifted from the chimney. Everyone, down to Spud and Syd, knew that this last hour would show to all the team the wooden faggots of the rick staddle foundations which covered the larger timbers stretching from the mushroom-shaped staddle stones.

'But why were there rats in the rick?' Spud asked Snobby in one of his better humoured moments.

'Just because some jack ass of a boy left a ladder against the stack for a couple of days. The rats went in. Then another time about Christmas some of you specials put a hurdle against the rick side and the rats climbed up. I'll tell ya,' he said, 'you have got a hell of a lot to learn yet awhile.'

Dusk fell over the rickyard, Snobby groped his way with the sacks into the granary. Showers of sparks flew from the engine and Bertie's brown, bald head showed like an oversized walnut as the light shone when he opened the fire-box to stoke up. The silhouette of bond cutter Mr Abel and Chot Bowman feeding the drum was of two men intent on finishing the rick before Bertie blew the five o'clock whistle. And finish they did. After sweeping all the shed grain down the gaping mouth of the machine, bond cutter and Chot came down the little ladder. The other men waited a minute or so for the last bolting of straw to be kicked out from the straw tier, the last sack to go to the granary and then Bertie stood on the engine footplate like a ship's captain on the bridge. Hand on regulator, he slowed the whole outfit down to half pace. The machine groaned as if tired, the engine slowly chuff, chuff, chuffed then, before the great wheel stopped, Chot grabbed the driving-belt, pulled it off its pulleys making it wriggle and squirm like a snake before it coiled in a heap on the rickyard floor. With one last gasp the engine stopped and quietness reigned once more.

Tired men grunted their good nights. Bertie and Chot sheeted up the thresher and everyone knew that when daylight returned

in the morning a new straw rick would be standing in the rick-yard and as Snobby said, the staddle would show its bones once more as only the faggots, the timbers and the stones marked the place where a work of art had stood twenty-four hours before.

But safe in the granary the corn was in sacks; in the new rick straw enough to thatch cottages, for next season's hayricks, litter for the yearling heifers and the odd one or two boltings to burn the bristles off the stuck pig. A dusty job threshing, but an event which gave satisfaction to master and men, fun for the children, and as Fred Abel counted the sacks of wheat and Healings offered him the price, Fred knew without pencil and paper that his half-year's rent would be in the bank by March 25th when George Bowman would be out again with the drill planting barley for the next harvest. Seedtime, harvest, threshing never ceases, he thought, as he sat in the ingle of the farmhouse kitchen.

'Well,' Bill Bowman enquired of his son, George, after the thresh as they sat in White Hart Cottage, 'what sort of cast did Master Abel get from his last rick?'

'The sacks be in the granary an it come off about nine acres in Crow Knell so it's easy to work out if you count the sacks. I reckons we had about twenty bags an acre, that's sixty bushels, or a bit more than thirty hundredweight—a damn good cast.' Ashton folk still talked of bags of three bushels although the corn went in four-bushel sacks—just one of those mysteries of the land. The yield was so good that Mr Abel could employ another man for the spring and summer work. Ern Peart came to live in at the farmhouse.

Each Friday Bill Bowman looked forward to the local paper. Mary Ann's reading gave him something to think about for the rest of the week. 'What's the news this wick, Missus?'

'Oi, coal's down. Six and six a ton to fifteen and tenpence, now the winter's very nigh over. I suppose you don't want to hear about the inspector's visit to A'sum Infirmary? They be smothered with bed sores, the patients be.'

'Mary!' Bill exclaimed. 'You never let me go to the Grubber, ull ya?'

'Bless the man no and I know our Jim won't. Oh there are still a few sprouts left, seven and ninepence a pot at the Smithfield. 'Tis to be hoped as our Jim got a pot or two left. Fat cattle up to £21. 15s. 0d., fat ripe bulls £22. 15s. 0d.'

'Ripe bulls,' Bill chuckled. ' 'Specrs they be overripe—finished their riding.'

Mary Ann straightened the paper, looked at Bill saying, 'Don't that come to all living creatures, Bill Bowman included.'

'Dall it,' Bill said. 'We reared eleven besides them you slipped.'

Mary Ann looked at the sides of bacon on the wall as she finished her reading with the news that fat bacon pigs were up to £9. 5s. 0d.

No village, no town, no city escaped tragedy in 1900, Ashton included. Harry Harris the blacksmith, whose shop under the walnut tree at the top of Blacksmith's Lane, mended the farm implements, shod the horses and was often drunk at six o'clock in the morning. The last week in March he walked down Little Pierce to give an evening feed to his trap horse and saw what he thought was a bundle of rags in the deep pond near the elms. It was Wilhemena Anderson of Rock Cottage. William Bowman heard the story in the bar at the White Hart but the *Evesham Journal*'s graphic account explained in detail what happened. Mary Ann read:

> Determined Suicide—On Wednesday the body of Wilhemena Anderson was found dead in a pond near her house and there was evidence she had taken her life in a most determined manner. It appeared the unfortunate woman, who was unhappily the victim to habits of intemperance and had been separated from her husband for some years, had first drunk a quantity of turpentine and, this being ineffective, had then deliberately walked from the house without shoes down to the pond where she was discovered.
>
> Deputy Coroner held the inquest.
>
> Alex Anderson was called and stated he was an engineer

and resided at Stratford, London. Deceased was his wife but they had been apart for fourteen years during which time he had sent her an allowance.

She was fifty-one and they separated because of her intemperate habits. He saw her last five years ago. Harry Harris, blacksmith, said on Wednesday evening he went to feed his horse at five-thirty and going down the lane saw something in the pool which looked like a bundle of rags but was the body of deceased lying face downwards. He obtained assistance and the body was got out. Deceased had no boots on but there was a stocking on one foot and a part of a stocking on the other.

P.S. Organ of Beckford deposed to being sent for and finding a body on the bench. Upon examination he found no marks of violence. He found deceased's boots in the kitchen and half a pint bottle containing turpentine, a small bottle containing furniture polish, both corks on a cloth near a tea cup. The turpentine bottle was almost empty. He traced footsteps to the water and three footprints under the water.

Edward Overthrow, Surgeon, of the village stated that midday Tuesday, deceased came to him. She was suffering from the effects of intemperance. He prescribed for her and saw her no more until midnight, she was then better but still under alcoholic influence. She wanted more medicine which he gave her, her mind being evidently disturbed.

Verdict: Drowning, Unsound Mind.

Bill Bowman sighed aloud, cleared his throat saying, 'She was a decent 'ooman and you, Mary Ann, knows something that unt reported in the *Journal*—never came out at the inquest.'

Mary Ann nodded. 'Yes, Bill, the bwoy. It was a devilish cowardly thing of Alex when he crept here from London in the dead of night and stole all Wilhemena had got to comfort her in her little cot—her only son. He fetched him years ago now and took him back with him to London.'

'That's when her took to drink,' Bill added. 'Her had got nothing to live for. Any local news more cheerful this wick, Mary Ann?'

'Only that eggs be sevenpence a dozen and the man at Beckford as studies the weather says March has been more wintry than usual, a lot of snow and frost. Next week it's April so let's hope the weather improves. The blow's on the damson and the bullace tree moves a bit. See those buds?'

CHAPTER FOUR

APRIL

'THANK GOD the wind's downhill,' Bill Bowman remarked as he sniffed the milder air coming up the road from Beckford way.

'Now what you be a worriting about at your time a life?' Mary Ann replied as she entered the front door with a basket of dried washing. The spare, rheumaticky little man stepped aside. 'It's a good job we unt all boiling pieces like you,' he told his wife, 'or else how the nation would we pass in the doorway?'

Then Harry called about nine that morning on his way from Land Close.

'Is it gwain to stay fine and mild, Dad, 'cause Master Bostock wants his lambs cut?'

Bill who observed the weather at the full moon, the new moon, watched the cats playing when rain was about, looked at Bredon Hill. 'Well, Harry, Bredon Hill unt got his cap on this morning, it ull keep dry a couple of days.'

Down at Bosworth's place Shep Bradfield hurdled the ewes and lambs. He sharpened his bone-handled knife on the stone. 'Best wait until after bait,' he advised Mr John Bostock. 'The lambs ull handle better after the dew is off their backs.'

In the hurdled pens ewes and lambs steamed and dried. The age-old method of tailing and castrating needs no detailed description. Harry caught the lambs, Shepherd Bradfield performed the operation. Harry Bowman and the shepherd finished with enough lambs' tails and sweetbreads to make a meal in those days when meat was a luxury.

While they were in the humour, the villagers brought their tom cats after tea for doctoring. Tom cats ran a mile when they saw Joe Bradfield. One or two had escaped the knife as they jumped from the sack bag.

As the Bowmans spent their waking hours feeding animals,

planting spring barley, spring oats on Bredon, Jim Bowman stoked at the Gas Works at A'sum. Nightly he fired the retorts, then back on the Bradbury motor-bike to Ashton where Mary Ann gave him breakfast. An hour on the sofa and work on the land he loved; land which could only offer twelve shillings a week to a labourer but could return pounds to the man who craved the pride of independence. Jim's foot was on the bottom of the ladder as he marketed his gillyflowers, looked anxiously at the asparagus beds for buds.

'You'll work yourself to death, Jim,' his mother said one Friday.

'Hard work never killed nobody,' Bill snapped out hoping beyond hope that Jim would one day be a master man. Lying on the sofa was the open copy of the weekly paper and Jim looking through it saw there in black and white that Bernard Bostock of Tottenham, London, had Halfpenny Horn, a superior piece of arable at Ashton to let.

'Bit a good ground,' Bill remarked. 'Ot ud no doubt grow sprouts. Old David have corned it for years—corn and turnips.'

Jim pondered in his mind the thought of having land handy his home, land he knew, where strawberries could be watched for birds; his mind was full of the idea of Ashton land. Oh, he thought, Mr Abel will help me. So over to Abel's farm he walked. In Crow Knell his brother George was drilling the spring corn, Prince and Diamond led by young Ern Peart pulling the five-furrow drill in straight lines up and down the field. Mr Abel stood on the headland.

'Well, Jim boy, what can I do for you?' he said.

Jim said, 'It's like this, Master Abel, I'd like Halfpenny Horn but I've got some more land Evesham way. Could you spare George Saturday afternoons to give a hand?'

'Apart from when I want him harvesting, yes, Jim, you shall have him. Now about Halfpenny Horn, it's to let I see in the paper—ten pounds a year.'

'I'll manage it,' Jim answered, 'if you can put a word in with the landlords.'

'I'll do more, Jim lad, I'll guarantee the rent, how will that do?'

So Jim got Halfpenny Horn, that long field between Boss Close and the Hempits and one could say that was the second rung of the farming ladder.

At White Hart Cottage there was always a crust of bread and cheese, a drop of rhubarb wine for all who called—a sort of village ritual, common among the poor. Ern Peart got lonely some evenings and called on the Bowmans.

'A good gaffer you got in Fred Abel,' Bill told him.

'Oi, don't I know it and all,' Ern replied. 'Good fittle and drink, a good bed, different to the last place.'

Mary Ann was a motherly soul and said, 'How did they treat ya then, my poor bwoy?'

'If I had lived as well as the 'osses it would have been all right.'

He went on to tell the listening Bowmans of his former plight, how he worked in service, living in for a farmer Moreton way. He had cider sop for breakfast, bread soaked in cider, a bit of rice pudding for dinner, and cider sop again at night. Never saw any meat nor drunk any tea. 'I was but thirteen when I went there. The milk had to be at the station by seveno 'clock,' and he told them how far he drove the float to catch the early morning train. Then he passed on to bed time. 'The gaffer,' he said, 'was frit to death of fire. I slept in the loft above the bedroom and wasn't allowed a candle to go to bed, feeling my way up a step ladder off the landing.' He told of frozen hands, chilblained feet on his journeys to the station. 'Mean, some farmers be,' Bill Bowman interrupted. 'As near as our master used to be. He ud split a caraway seed to get the correct weight.' Fred Abel kept a good stocked pantry, always went to Tewkesbury in the back end of the year and bought a hundredweight cheese at twopence a pound, tasty, George Bowman called it. He had had plenty in the fields with home-made bread—bread with plenty of stay in it. This was bread which lasted in a working man's belly until knocking-off time. With the improved food—eggs, bacon—Ern Peart grew into a strong young fellow.

Two hundredweight and a quarter and a fourteen-pound sack of beans was nothing on such shoulders as he carried them up the granary steps.

George Bowman and Ern Peart, not having slipped the plain gold ring on an eligible girl's third finger of the left hand and with no children at school, took little interest in education. Harry and Emma on the other hand wanted above all things for their descendants to have a better chance in life. Miss Holland the school Governess had been bedevilled by outbreaks of measles, snow and floods during the winter but by now she described the attendance as 'fairly good' in her log book. What problems the poor woman had with absentees! Later this April she reports: 'Attendance not so good today. Several of the elder children have been kept to gather primroses for sale.' The following week came an entry that Frank Early was absent and being treated by the doctor for water on the brain. Rev Grant saw Mrs Early who told him that Frank must not be pressed to learn. The doctor said he would be better at home, his head being too large for his body. Then the head teacher admitted two sisters—Sarah and Lillian Bond, one aged seven and the other aged eight. They had never attended school before and in her log book she described them as both equally backward, scarcely knowing their letters.

John Bostock, although a member of the School Board, took much less interest than the doctor in the comings and goings at that rectangular house where the desks were hard and the temperature often low. The times the doctor walked down the road with his thermometer! He passed between the rows of ragged children looking for signs of measles, scarlet fever, in fact, looking for anything that their parents had overlooked. The doctor was indeed a great asset to the village of Ashton.

John Bostock took Harry Bowman to Gloucester some market days by train, other times they went farther afield to Shrewsbury loading store cattle on the train for Beckford station.

Sir Arthur Quiller Couch in his poem* on Eckington Bridge

* *Oh pastoral Heart of England*

has described to a nicety the land 'twixt Cotswold and Malverns; a lush green land of cattle knee-deep in grass by brook and riverside. The time had come in Ashton and the villages around when small farmers with small fields, willow-shaded ditches, ceased to grow so much corn; the hard Canadian wheat flowed into our country from the Prairies.

As the River Severn funnels through Gloucestershire to Tewkesbury, the Avon pushes Worcestershire and Warwickshire water through the bank at the Hams or river meadows, adding to the Midland floods. But how lush grows the timothy grass and cocksfoot in spring after the silt has overflowed, fertilising the meadows! Could any village have a more apt name than neighbouring Twyning—between the rivers? As the storms are seen from Bredon Hill creeping up the Bristol Channel, then the Severn Estuary, they often split in two below Tewkesbury, one part veering east and following the line of the Cotswold Hills, while the other makes for that barrier of alien stone at Malvern. So down this vale folk stand and stare as the sky blues over the shape of the lowland, the storms blackening the Wolds and Malvern Ridge. Here graziers like John Bostock brought the Runts or Welsh black cattle from Shrewsbury. The Greenings, that great droving family, past masters of the art, attended all the markets. What an excellent opportunity they had to judge and value cattle. Pitching sales took place at the main markets. Here at the Oldbury in Tewkesbury, dealers higgled and haggled over prices. The Greenings saw the first auction at this time at Banbury; private selling had been the rule of the day. Knowing which dealer bought the bunches of store cattle, the Greenings scissors marked the beasts in the street or market place with the dealer's mark on the rump of each animal, raddled the sheep to identify them. All the drovers' inns were known to this family of nomads moving the flocks and herds from place to place, staying the night at the inns where the innkeeper had a paddock to accommodate the stock, bothies for the Greenings to sleep the night. How colourful these characters were! They described seeing 125 Welsh collie dogs tied to the railings at a Welsh border sheep sale. John Bostock and Harry

Bowman watched these dogs bringing the sheep down the tracks off the Radnor Forest and Brecon Beacons. Harry Bowman took it all in as he, an Ashton man, saw and heard bargains struck by the striking of the palm of the hand, and the deal clinched with luck money. As the deal was struck they shouted 'Sold' for all to hear so that there would be no going off the deal. If the dealer didn't receive luck money when he bought from the farmer, the farmer was supposed to have bad luck with his stock at home. Dealing had its amusing side and who above all people should be deceived but John Bostock, John who had a history of farming before him which went back 600 years. It happened like this: Shepherd Bradfield told Mr Bostock the previous autumn that the Kerry Hill ewes they had had for some two seasons were due to go and a change of stock would be a good thing. Mr Bostock sent his flock to Beckford market two miles away and sold out. He then went to the Welsh border where he bought promising-looking Kerry ewes coloured with yellow ochre on their fleeces. The Greenings drove them from Wales, taking several days.

'What do you think of the fresh ewes?' John Bostock asked Shepherd Bradfield as they lay on Little Hill by the Cuckoo Pen.

The shepherd put his dog round them and hurdled them in the corner of the field.

'What's it worth to keep me mouth shut, Master Bostock?' the shepherd said.

'Why? What's wrong?' John Bostock replied.

'Well, you have bought the same sheep as we sold at Beckford a month ago but they a bin painted with ochre.'

It got round and Harry told his father, Bill Bowman, who remarked, 'Thur's no fool like an old fool.'

The Greenings were well thought of as honest men, not afraid of work among stock. In the Oldbury at Tewkesbury they always kept a jar of cider in an empty pig pen. Pitcher, the bumbailiff, who worked for the auctioneers, had a nasty habit of drinking the cider and one day Harry Greening said to his brother George, 'I'll cure him from that.' So the next Wednes-

day he filled the jar with linseed oil, Pitcher took a good swig and ran through the streets of Tewkesbury as the oil worked on his stomach like a strong purge. It's not known whether Pitcher sampled any of the Greenings' cider after that but Pitcher had some trouble sometimes as bumbailiff. He liked a joke himself and once coloured a Liberal farmer's pigs with a blue mark down their backs. But there was one memorable occasion when Pitcher was sent to a farm where, as Bill Bowman put it, 'the farmer had forgot to pay his bills' and a distraint order was put on him by the court. As Pitcher visited the farm near Ashton where a little man did a bit of stock-rearing and dealing he was supposed to list all the stock, seeing that nothing was moved while his creditors sold him up. The sight of Pitcher walking up Ashton Street was too much for Emma Bowman. Emma knew his errand and sent her daughter Lucy to follow 'the Bum' as he was called. Up into the woods he went to the smallholding and there he met the small farmer who showed him his live and dead stock. Then he told Pitcher that there were a few hens in the privy up the garden. Pitcher said they would have to be listed for the sale in two days' time. Into the privy went Pitcher counting the hens and as he did so the farmer locked the door and padlocked the asp and staple outside. Pitcher was a prisoner. 'There you stops, my lad,' the farmer said as he took him a jar of cider and a loaf of bread and cheese, and so Pitcher slept the night on the hens' bedding straw. The farmer got moving and sold every implement, all the stock, every stick of furniture, and let Pitcher out the next day. The sale was called off, there being nothing to sell. As Bill Bowman told Mary Ann, 'You can't take a shirt off a naked man.'

'I can't be bothered with bumbailiffs, Bill,' she said. 'Yers young Jim, can't you hear that motor-bike clucking up the Groaten Road like a hen about to lay?'

Jim, hungry and tired from the Gas Works, propped his motor-bike against the Burgundy pear tree in the garden of White Hart Cottage. 'Just a bite of bread and boiled bacon, a cup of tea, a kip on the sofa and I'll be off to Halfpenny Horn. Sam O'Rourke, as come over from Ireland to keep the top pub,

has given me a few asparagus roots to plant. He grows grass [asparagus] like rick pegs at Ayles Acre. Never has such a gardener entered the parish, he employs four men regular on his smallholding.'

Bill Bowman laughed. Leaning on his stick he said, 'Well, I'll be dalled if that yunt the licker. Sam at the public giving sparragrass roots to you in the Salvation Army as never touches no liquor.'

Jim couldn't explain to his dad this new religion but just said, 'We get our soldiers from the pubs.'

Bill Bowman looked across the vale to the Cotswold edge and thought of the bare-fisted fights he had had Club days in Crow Knell, reliving the sack-carrying as he luggered the two-hundredweight-and-a-quarter bags of wheat up the granary steps at Abel's farm during the Crimean War, sighed as he told Mary Ann that it was as much as ever he could do to carry the empty sack now. 'Sparragrass,' he thought, 'lasts twenty years. Jim ull benefit, I shan't see it though.'

About half past eleven that April morning, Jim took the roots to Halfpenny Horn and with his setting pin planted them in straight rows up the field. Bill was uneasy at home, he was anxious to see Jim working on the rented land where Mr Abel had helped him to become tenant. Down the village street Bill propelled himself, bearing heavily on his sticks, until he reached the headland of Halfpenny Horn. Here he sat on a wicker pot hamper, saw Jim nimbly planting the roots, watched the larks rise, the peewits dive from the blue sky. Dive deceivingly, loudly calling 'Peewit', pretending to land on their nests. Nests of eggs matching the soil, the limestone, faraway from the settling birds. Clip clop, clip clop as Jack Benfield's stallion comes along Beckford's way making his rounds of Ashton's brood mares, Jack, riding his pony alongside the jet black shire horse with strawed and ribboned mane and tail, stops a minute to talk to Jim's dad.

'Well, Willum,' he says, 'what's young Jim up to, what's he planting?'

'Sparragrass,' Bill replies. 'Good grub, the gentry likes it.'

'Oi,' Jack replies, 'maybe I'll stick to my turkeys and the milking cows and travel Carburetter to stint mares and get good colts.'

'Carburetter!' Bill laughed. 'I'll go to hell if I ever yeard a hoss called that afore. That's the part as the petrol goes through on young Jim's motor-bike. Thee ut get theeself talked about calling an entire [stallion] Carburetter and milking a cow with only one tit.'

'Who told you about my old cow then, Willum? I admit it's right, her lost the other three-quarters with the garget and I couldn't bear to part with her.'

'How dost manage for a bull nowadays, Master Benfield? I suppose you borrows Nathan Bird's from Beckford?'

'Not likely,' Jack replied and in a whisper as if someone from Ashton would hear he said, 'Willum, I tell you a secret. My neighbour keeps a bull, a white shorthorn in the next field to my few cows. Well, ent it easy to make a gap in the hedge and let my cows through every time one comes on a bulling?'

Bill laughed again as he rocked on the hamper, 'Bit mean, unt it, they be bulled once a year and you pulls thur tits twice a day.'

As Jim reached the headland with the planting, his old dad said with regret, 'I be mortal sorry I can't help ya, bwoy, but if you works like you have today you'll farm all Beckford's way one day for certain.'

Sam O'Rourke was, besides an asparagus grower, a publican, and a scholar. When the Parish Council wanted a clerk he fitted the bill nicely. The roads, the drains, the water, had for years been the responsibility of the Vestry Meeting—the parson and the squire and a few ratepayers. Now local government had become a reality and the Parish Council, the District Council, took on the responsibility. As the century turned the Council inherited quite big problems. Five members served—Charles Bradfield, Jonathan Slatter, Charles Wheeler, David Clarke and the Chairman.

Parish meetings in the school in the spring were mainly attended by a few ratepayers. The Parish Council meeting ap-

pointed Dr Overthrow as Chairman and Charles Bradfield proposed that the Council inspect the footpath from the church to Parish, a hamlet on the Hill. Mr Bradfield reported that he had been promised the stone to repair the gout under the footpath, also to repair the bridges; timber for the stiles leading to Mr Slatter's garden at Paris from Church Close and those to Mr Wheeler's garden into Hempt Pits was to be done away with and the proper footpath used in the future. It was proposed by Mr Bradfield that the grating under the footpath be refixed by the Council or a new one put in its place.

It was proposed by Mr Wheeler that Mr Bradfield repair the drain under the footpath to the moat, that Mr Abel be asked to clean the ditch at the bottom of Clark's orchard, and that the tin deed-box be handed to the Parish Council by the vicar.

At their next meeting there was a long discussion about the lunatic estate of the late owner of Boss Close. The solicitors dealing with this agreed to propose improvements. Paths had been diverted to Grafton, bridges had fallen into disrepair, so Messrs Wheeler and Slatter, masons and carpenters, agreed to reinstate these rights of way. The solicitors of the estate were to provide the quarry stone and bricks and lime and sand to improve the pathways from Church Close to Boss Close and Green Hempits Meadow.

The Rural District Council that year had no representative from Ashton and suggested extending the waterworks at the cost of £139. Dr Overthrow was appointed to represent Ashton on the Rural District Council and the Parish Council thought the extensions could be done to the waterworks at less expense to the parish. Mr Charles Wheeler gauged the overflow of the present water tank and found that twenty-eight hogsheads of water were running to waste every twenty-four hours.

The Parish Council thought the Rural District Council high-handed in their approach at the time when Ashton was unrepresented and wrote and told them so. It was resolved that an extra tank at Abel's Farm was all that was needed to hold 50 gallons with two extra standpipes. Mr Jonathan Slatter did the work at much less cost to the parish.

At a meeting held on April 24th there was a dispute over the parchment of the Parish Enclosure Award of 1773. Ashton maintained that it was a joint award with Beckford and they had an equal right to hold it. It was decided that it should remain with the Vicar of Beckford but that Ashton Parish Council might inspect it and borrow it for any of their meetings. And so Ashton Parish Council developed from the Vestry Meetings but always remained a junior partner of Beckford in matters of the church.

CHAPTER FIVE

MAY—THE PROMISED LAND

As the cold east winds yellowed the corn in Ashton, Bill Bowman looked across Crow Knell and repeated to Mary Ann the age-old saying—Look at your corn in May and you'll come weeping away, Look at the same in June and you'll come home in another tune.

'Ah,' he said, 'I a bin along the Groaten Road and sin Abel's wheat as yella as saffron. The blow on the plum trees looks scorched in the cold wind. Bostock's 'osses clears up the sweet clover hay our Harry carries out in a kerf to the medda every night.'

Mary Ann, busying herself at the bread oven, replied: 'I don't know, fust you mithers about young Jim a-burning the candle at both ends, now it's Abel's corn, Bostock's hosses.'

' 'Tis in me blood, Mother, when crops and stock looks kind it heartens me.' Bill's old eyes stared glassily over the vale.

Up at Bumbo, Sam Jinks sold his holding, the farm where young Jim Bowman was stockman, retiring to a cottage opposite Dr Overthrow's.

Fred Burford, a bailiff from Cropthorne Heath, bought Bumbo, Sam's place. Farm bailiffs have always been viewed with a certain suspicion when they start farming on their own. Fred was no exception. As Bill Bowman, the Bradfields, the Wheatcrofts met in the White Hart drinking Sam O'Rourke's excellent cider, they talked of Fred Burford. 'Mixed the sugar with the sand, no doubt,' Bill suggested.

'Oi,' said Joe Bradfield the shepherd, six foot two inches in his stockinged feet. 'Who's to know when a sow farrows down whether her got ten or seven piglets, and when they goes to market, an't the bailey got plenty a scope to sell some on the side or on the way there to the Evesham gardeners! Fred's boss only

comes wickends to Cropthorne.'

'Feathered his nest you reckon, Fred have?' Frank Wheatcroft asked.

'It have bin said,' and Bill Bowman tapped with his stick on the bar of the White Hart, 'Fred Burford took a belly of pigs off one night on the muck-cart in a cider barrel. I be nation sorry such a totrel 'ave come to Bumbo, who's a-gwain to work for him?'

Bumbo Farm stretched long and narrow like a turkey's neck up between Ashton Wood and the Cuckoo Pen. One field of four acres was just scrubland covered with gorse and fern. Ashton men, such as railway platelayers and roadmen, hungry for allotments worked for Burford in their spare time.

Fred Burford was as subtle as the serpent in Genesis. He called one evening at the White Hart, paid the landlord for drinks all round and put a proposal to the village labourers.

'Slip Hill,' he said, 'you chaps know better than I do what the soil's like.'

'Fox earthy,' Bill Bowman replied, 'alive a rabbits, smothered with gorse and blackberries, unt worth a hatful of crabs.'

'I noticed the state of it but you want allotments. As you know, I come from Cropthorne but Sam Jinks has been a good friend of mine. Would you like Slip Hill for allotments? Four of you take an acre apiece, rent free for three years, providing you vote for me on the District Council against Dr Overthrow.'

'I'm game to have a go and clear it over the summer.' Frank was the first volunteer.

'This is in our spare time of course,' Harry Bowman went on, 'but me and the missus and kids ull do our stint.' John Stallard the roadman agreed to join them and Jack Alves the steam-engine driver made up the four.

The Slip Hill no doubt got its name from an old landslide; it almost looked like slipping again, it was so steep.

'"The Promised Land" we be gwain to rename it,' Frank Wheatcroft said as he walked that May evening down Ashton Street, leaving Harry Bowman with drink-befuddled brain to find his way to Land Close. Harry, taking the wrong lane,

found himself at the turnpike where the finger post pointed to Tewkesbury and Evesham. He clung to the four-by-four timber, looked at the finger board saying, 'We be two damn fools—thee canst not talk and I canst not read.'

'Promised Land! I reckon young Jim shows more promise,' thought Bill Bowman as he hobbled into White Hart Cottage. He muttered 'Promised Land' to Mary Ann till she got sick and saded with the very words. 'Moses never reached the Promised Land,' she said—'and you have had more than your usual pint.'

'Neither did Ern Peart get his,' Bill said. 'Along uv Honour Weston 'as come here on holiday at Abel's place.'

'Whatever do you mean—Young Ern?'

'Oi, he told us in the Hart as he got her on Abel's straw rick and just as he was about to reach the Promised Land she ketched him the master smack across the mouth.'

'Serve him right,' Mary Ann declared as she took another candle from the cupboard, lit it and pushed it gently into the liquid wax, all that remained of the burnt-out candle in the candlestick. 'The farm chaps today think they can do as they please with innocent young girls as comes in the village.'

'Innocent,' Bill lit his pipe from the candle with a wooden spill. 'Thee wasn't very innocent after your eighteenth birthday —eleven youngsters we had, didn't we, or was it thirteen?'

'Eleven we reared and two we buried.'

'Ah, it's a bigger struggle to keep um than to get um, I allus says,' was Bill's final shot before, candle in hand and Mary Ann giving him a gentle push, he once more ascended the wooden hill to the feather mattress under the blue slates.

The four Ashton worthies all possessed jadders or stock axes. They had often used their heavy hoe to stock the big boar thistles so common on Bredon Hill. The scene on these May evenings down Blacksmith's Lane was of Harry Harris at the village smithy hammering the white-hot iron of the jadder's edge, then tempering the blade in the stone water-trough beside the anvil. As he gripped the jadder blades with his tongs, he plunged the hot metal into the trough, then out again like a duck diving head first in the pond below, then out again. The

steam rose, the metal took on hues of brown, blue and black as each jadder was sharpened, the final process which made the cutting edge shine like silver. Harry Bowman's executed it with the deftness gained by years on the soil. He held the blade on a grindstone while Frank turned the handle and John Stallard poured water from a bucket on the revolving stone.

'That's more like it,' Jack Alvis said as he gingerly ran his thumb along each blade. 'They was blunt, you could have rode bare assed to London on um afore.'

That week on May 4th and May 11th, Miss Holland, the school mistress, wrote in her log book that 'Attendance was not so good as might be in Standard IV, several kept away to help their parents in agriculture.'

'Never too young to learn,' Bill Bowman, leaning on Slip Hill gate, told Emma his daughter-in-law as she and her older children cleared the briars where the blackberries blossomed.

When Harry and his friends came up the hill after tea, Bill had gone back to his cottage but, ever concerned with the family, he told Mary Ann, 'They a made a start on Slip Hill, it is to be hoped as Fred Burford ull play the white man with them bwoys. It's happened in Ashton before, when land have been cleared and cleaned fit for cropping, then the owner takes possession. Have they got anything in writing, I wonder.'

As they talked, the slashers, the jadders felled the gorse, grafting tools dealing with the big roots. The fires blazed away and the look of Slip Hill changed from yellow gorse blossom and white blackberry blossom to brown fox earth. As the Bowmans, the Wheatcrofts, John Stallard and Jack Alvis made inroads into the thick bush, the occasional deer broke cover, deer that had escaped from Elmley Park. Rabbits scurried to their holts under gorse and elder—'Just the wrong time of year for rabbit pie,' Harry said. 'They does be either milky sucking young or in kindle. The bucks smells strong, I don't fancy um.' But the odd young one big enough for the pot emerged and paid the penalty.

The enthusiasm of the Ashton men to gain a little independence by renting allotments was inbred. Their great-grandfathers

had lost that independence at the time of enclosure, a ray of light shone dimly over the Promised Land. One evening at the White Hart, Bill Bowman, whose every bone, muscle and sinew had breathed Parochialism since he first saw the light in the village under the hill, spoke quietly aside to Landlord O'Rourke.

'Sam,' he said, ' 'tis good on ya the way you helped young Jim with sparragrass roots for Halfpenny Horn. Mr Abel had stood by him besides. You know our Jim unt one of your customers, T.T., Salvation Army is his line. I be mortal worried about Harry though. He with his missus and kids be hard put to at times, just one or two here to slake his thirst Saturdays is all he can manage.'

'What's on your mind then, Bill?' the Irish landlord said. 'Sure they work hard on the Promised Land.'

Bill wiped his whiskers with his red spotted handkerchief and sighed. 'Moses never entered the Promised Land. Mary Ann read this to me out of the Bible and I don't trust Fred Burford, he's too crooked to lie straight in bed.'

Sam listened intently to this native of Ashton adding, 'We Irish are men of our word, what of this man from Cropthorne Heath? I gather Harry, Frank, Jack and roadman Stallard have cleared Slip Hill as it was known, ready for ploughing.'

As the days in May lengthened, Fred Abel lent his plough team to George Bowman to plough the virgin soil of the proposed allotments. Roadman Stallard drove the team at lengths as George turned over the furrows. Harry said, 'You'll have to stop every now and again when the share of the plough strikes a hidden root of gorse or elder.'

The dust rose in little clouds behind the plough as hillside earth was laid bare to wind and sun, perhaps for the first time.

As ploughing finished, the four young men leant on the gate of Slip Hill and felt like prospectors in the American West. 'Ah, the Promised Land,' Frank Wheatcroft said between puffs from his pipe. 'Too late for taters but we could plant it with swedes this summer. It would be a start.'

'Good idea,' Jack Alvis said, Jack who had broken more acres of fallow ground with the steam tackle than he had eaten hot

linners. 'Swedes it shall be.'

Harry agreed. 'The seed's cheap, I can broadcast it and no loubt Master Abel ull let our George harrow and roll it in.'

The men left the hill in an optimistic mood, then thought of he election. The posters went up for the District Council: Dr)verthrow, Surgeon, proposed by John Bostock. Fred Burford, Farmer, proposed by Syd Jackson from Ashton Wood.

'I hope that Burford won't take it out on nobody if he comes off second best,' Bill told Sam O'Rourke. 'Do you know what he mean devil gave our Jim for Salvation Army Self Denial? —twopence.'

Sam, an Irish Catholic, was shocked.

'Religion surely is helping your neighbour, that's exactly why my customers give to the Salvation Army when Jim sells War Cries on Saturday nights.'

Election day came, Police Sergeant Organ from Beckford stood at the school door in his navy blue uniform with an extra bit of polish on his black boots. Dr Overthrow had reminded his patients that his bills were overdue but come and put the cross n the right place and 'I'm an easy man to the working man'. Needless to say the foreigner from Cropthorne Heath was beaten hands down and once again the good doctor would represent Ashton Parish on the Pebworth Rural District Council.

Fred Burford, who had been so cock-a-hoop, fumed knowing ull well now that the village doctor had the trump card. The very next day gloom fell over the Promised Land as he told the men who cleared it that he himself would plant it and would hey remove their tools. 'People as lives in glass houses shouldn't hrow stones,' Harry Bowman told him, and that night he and his three friends agreed that they would poach Fred Burford's hill the next winter. Somehow I think Sergeant Organ of Beckford would not have gone out of his way to catch them.

Meanwhile, after the election, the children had yet another holiday: '21st May 1900—school closed all day to celebrate the Relief of Mafeking.' Once more Ashton parents who had sons fighting in the Boer War were anxious for their safety.

But Ashton had its lighter side in the merry month of May as

Snobby Tomkins did his hair-cutting session on Sunday mornings at the back of the White Hart.

'If he don't make ya cry he won't make ya laugh,' George Bowman said. 'He still uses the scissors as his missus used to cut the carpet with—they don't cut your hair, they go past it.' Then shaving, if it was a young chap, a bit nervous, Snobby would dip his cut-throat razor in boiling water and then draw the back of it across the customer's throat.

May 21st, the Great Relief of Mafeking, gave the village boys a day to see the bullocks ploughing on the top of Bredon Hill. John Brown's team provided a spectacle at dinner time, so different from the horse teams four at length in the Vale. Horses would stand in the furrow with their nose-bags of food and eat the hour through—bullocks, the boys found not at all the same. They lay down in the furrow, loose traced, chewing their cud while the ploughman sat under a wall and ate his dinner. It is a thing the boys remembered, that bullocks lay down to ruminate, horses often sleep standing up.

On the last days of May, Jim Bowman planted his sprouts in Halfpenny Horn after the night's blistering heat of the gas retort. His brother George cut the asparagus at Klondike or Bull Rurrow in time allowed by Fred Abel. Bill, short of hay, grazed his donkey on Ashton's grass verges. Joe Bradfield hurdled Bostock's sheep and lambs, daily looking for where the bluebottle fly had laid her eggs in the soiled fleece or where the maggots had hatched in bunches around their tails. He clipped the muck and wool from their breech, which he called 'belting them', before next month's shearing. He soaked the belting of shorn wool and sheep manure in a hogshead barrel to make liquid manure for his garden. The blossom or blow of apple pear and plum had gone with the cold winds. The fruit had formed but no one, not even Bill Bowman or Sam O'Rourke, would venture to predict the fruit prospects.

Here on the village green where the leaning elms gave shade to the old men with their long pipes, Bill Bowman sat his evenings away. Some had worked with stock and crops; they talked of crops' progress, the weather, the health of their neighbours.

Mr. Martin, the first man to grow *Purple* Pershore plums

The old Baptist Chapel

Evesham Corps Salvation Army Brass Band, 1900.
Jim's euphonium on the right

Bill Bowman and his donkey, with Jim in the cart

The four-horse team ploughing in the sprout stalks

The cider makers and the ten-hogshead barrel

The children gambolled, laughing on the unclaimed grass, played with sheep dogs and drank in the words of their elders. Near by were the black and white cottages, the bees busy on the garden beans, the lowing of cattle, the bleating of sheep, Bill Bowman remarked, 'What a lot we have to be thankful for—milk, fresh air, vegetables. My daughter,' he told the company, 'as bin in service in the cities and she says that old men walk miles from the suburbs eager to find nature fresh and green, to walk on the sward as they did as boys.'

Snobby Tomkins observed, 'We are not all like Fred Burford. Thur ull be a hot place a-waiting for that gentleman when the Grafton Bowmans plant him in the churchyard.'

'Oh you can't judge like that,' Bill declared. 'Our Jim as has his heart in the Salvation Army reckons it's never too late to repent of your wickedness—that's General Booth's maxim. Some as was crooked now wears the uniform.'

CHAPTER SIX

JUNE

MILTON WROTE a comparison of life—city and country life:

> As one who long in populous city pent,
> Where houses thick and sewers annoy the air,
> Forth issuing on a summer's morn to breathe
> Among the pleasant villages and farms,
> Adjoin'd, from each thing met conceives delight
> The smell of grain of tedded grass, or kine,
> Or dairy each rural sight, each rural sound.

Jim Bowman, after his slaving at the brickyard, his hard grind at the gas retorts, felt that in General Booth, the founder and leader of the Salvation Army, there was real compassion, not only for the soul—a much used word at the beginning of the century—but for human rights, the dignity of man. Stanley who met Livingstone in the African forest, confronted men dwarfed by the very trees they lived with, men who knew of no other world. Stanley wrote *Darkest Africa,* General Booth was more concerned with what could be termed the people next door. Jim Bowman read *Darkest England* with horror. Though not a radical in politics, he could see that radical changes were the crying need, more in the cities than in Ashton. Twelve-shillings-a-week-Ashton enjoyed the benefits of outdoor life. To quote General Booth's words:

> The lot of a negress in the equatorial forest is not perhaps a very happy one but is it so very much worse than that of many a pretty orphan girl in our Christian capital? We talk of the brutalities of the dark ages and we profess to shudder

as we read in books of the shameful extraction of the rights of feudal superiors. And yet here, beneath our eyes, the same hideous abuse flourishes unchecked. A young penniless girl, if she is pretty, is often hunted from pillar to post by her employers, confronted always by the alternative, starve or sin, and when once the poor girl has consented to buy the right to earn her living by the sacrifice of her virtue, she is treated as a slave and an outcast by the very men who have ruined her.

She is swept downwards to the bottomless pit of prostitution. But there, even at the lowest depths, excommunicated by humanity, an outcast from God, she is far nearer His pitying heart than the scribes and pharisees who forced her down, who stand silently by. What a satire upon Christianity and on civilisation. It is also the inevitable destiny of thousands of Englishmen to be brutalised in to worse than beasts by the condition of their environment. Why all the apparatus of temples, churches, meeting houses to save men from perdition in a world which is to come, while never a helping hand is stretched out to save them from the inferno of their present life?

The General was very much aware of the urgent need for a social gospel, and while Jim Bowman in a very limited way as a soldier in the Army collected money for the slums of London, and indeed the soup kitchens of Cheltenham, the stark reality of what dire poverty brings in its train was always with him.

Jim's fiancée, Miss Catherine Eastwood of Evesham, supported him in this, but young Jim had to make a living for himself in order to marry, to bring up a family. His brother George's donkey-cart loads of produce for market changed to strawberries and peas and as June breezes blew the May blossom off the hawthorn, the prospect of fruit under Bredon could be assessed. Mary Ann read the *Journal* of June 21st, 1900 to Bill Bowman: 'Plum Prospect. Every indication of a good crop. Pershores as usual hold out promise of excellent yield, trees are well laden. This will strengthen the idea the variety still pays for growing notwithstanding what some wiseacres think. Victorias

are shy, damsons promise a good crop. Strawberries fair, peas light because of a wet spring.'

Bill had heard such prophecies before and reminded Mary Ann what a find that was in Tydesley Wood when Mr Crooke discovered the first Pershore Plum tree. 'Vics be shy,' he added. 'They don't want to be too thick, they ull be small else.'

'Wheat,' Mary Ann read on, ' 'tis eleven and threepence a bag of three bushels in A'sum market.'

'Pershore Fair next wick, Missus,' and Bill looked back on the time when he led the gang from Ashton with scythes mowing the lush grass on Tewkesbury Ham.

'We slept in barns,' he said, 'and if the farmer gave us ham and eggs for breakfast—it was ham and eggs, mind your legs, or bread and cheese, take your ease. "Keep the knowl or heel of the scythe blade down," the men told me when I was but a hobbledehoy and the art of sharpening was to put a long edge on the blade. My scythe's in the hovel,' and sighing he said, 'I'd like once more to show um the way round twenty acres.'

That night when George Bowman came home he told them, Fred Abel is starting cutting the meadow grass on Monday, that will mean I can't help our Jim for a while.'

Bill chuckled over his supper as he said, 'Dost want to borrow my scythe and get something like close to the ground, or be you gwain to sit on yer ass on the mowing machine and let Prince and Diamond pull ya round?'

'If I can cut seven acres by eleven o'clock, how ull that do, Dad?' he said. 'That's starting at about quarter to four mind.'

George looked his nigh four-score-year-old dad in the eye adding, 'That's what my aim is, cutting it when the dew still soaks the horses' fetlocks before the flies get too busy. The bree fly I means, Dad, not the blue assed un as worried Bostock's sheep until Shepherd Bradfield sheared them.'

'Tidy job Bradfield did shearing the yows,' Bill added. 'But let's go and sit down in the garden and enjoy the evening cool.'

As George and his dad sat under the fruit trees they were joined by Rev Grant.

'Nice to see ya, Vicar,' was the old man's greeting. 'Ud ya like

a tot a my rhubarb wine, 'tis as clear as claret?'

'Thank you, Bill,' the Vicar replied. 'You countrymen make a wine out of all that God's earth produces.'

'Mowing we start on Monday, Vicar, and Dad bin trying to belittle the two-hoss machine. Says we don't get so close to the ground as his scythe.' As George spoke he totted out the rhubarb wine for all three to drink under the garden trees.

'There is a poem by John Gay that emphasises how close the scythe skims the ley,' said the Vicar.

> The labourer with the bending scythe is seen
> Shaving the surface of the waving green . . .

The swallows dipped in flight clearing the air of insects between the White Hart and the cottage. The broken-voiced cuckoo, called 'Cush Cuck-oo' upon the Promised Land. The short grass around Bowman's cottage became slippery with dew —'A fine day, I warrant, on the morrow, Vicar, thur's all appearance of it.' Rev Grant finished his wine, the little party retired in the evening cool, the Vicar tricycled to his house, George Bowman dreamed of the waving hay meadows, of Diamond and Prince.

The early birds twittered in the half light of Monday morning as George fumbled in the stable where Diamond and Prince pulled some of the last of 1899 clover from their rack. But George worked instinctively as morning-muzzy he geared up his horses with chain harness. Led one at a time to the stone drinking-trough, their hind hooves slid lazily over the worn steps from their stable into the yard. 'Hold up ull ya,' George broke the four o'clock silence of the land workers. In the rickyard, cleaned, oiled and knife sharp stood the two-horse mower, red and canary yellow.

'Hold back,' George spoke to each horse in turn until abreast they stood on either side of the machine's pole. As he lifted the pole he strapped it to the underpart of the horses' collars. Big carrying straps put the machine's weight on Diamond and Prince's necks. George fastened the traces to the swinging supp-

trees, put a wooden coupling stick between the horses' mullens fastened by spring clips. He then made sure the bedding which held the fingers and the cutting knife was secure in an upright position and that the gear knob by the main drive was in the 'out' position.

A pair of rope reins, slip knot tied on the left ring of Diamond's mullen and on the right ring of Prince's, a little armful of 1899 clover put on the iron seat—'Just to stop me from getting a sore ass'—and, mounting the machine, George drove up the village street, past cottages where the blue smoke of the kindling wood rose from the chimneys towards Crow Knell. As he entered the gateway he dropped the bedding, pitched the fingers with the lever by his side, knocked the gear knob to the 'in' position and was ready to start the haymaking of 1900.

Pigeons cooed in the hedgerow trees, larks rose in the morning sky, rabbits scuttered to their burrows as the chatter of George's machine broke the morning silence of Crow Knell.

At ten o'clock George unreined his horses, slipped the spare rein under the chinstrap of their mullens and over their ears. Diamond and Prince then arched their necks, eating the green hay from the fresh swathe. The whole object of fixing the mullen rein in this way was to prevent the two-horse team from stepping on the loose rein with their forefeet. As George, by the scowl of brow, reckoned on how many acres he had cut in swathe he slumped under the nearest tree and started his half-hour break for bait.

'Morning, George,' Mr Abel's voice called through the hedge, 'You have made a good start on Crow Knell, I heard the clatter of the mower knife as I had my breakfast. I've brought you a drop more cider.'

'Ah,' said the carter, 'I'll be glad of that. Parson says it's gwain to be mortal hot. Or is it too glitty to bide, Gaffer?'

'No, George, the dew was heavy and the sun went to bed red last night; I think we shall have a few days dry. I'll send Ern Peart down presently to rake out the swathe under the hedge.'

George finished the first hayfield and the hot sun bleached the

top of the swathes a mousy colour. Next day Ern brought Fred Abel's pony down with the swathe turner. Round and round he went, curling the swathes, green underneath, for the June sun to make into hay. As the last birds twittered to roost in the evening hedges and the dew damped both stubble and swathe, the horses brushed and combed of their shoulder sweat rolled in the meadow, drank deep from the pond.

Back at White Hart Cottage Mary Ann read to Bill a newspaper forecast of the intense heat coming. '*The Mark Lane Express*,' she said, 'is quoted here as saying that it's no trouble to make good hay, a pony working the swathe turner in two days of burning heat will bring fodder in first-rate order, then put into the larger walleys and into hay cocks for curing, cart to the stack where the elevator operated by the pony saves an enormous amount of hard muscular work in stacking.'

Old man Bowman thought deeply. Thought of the mauling work of fifty years ago. 'Mary,' he at last said, 'you knows as I have never bin a jibber, never collar proud like some folk. I complained when the reaping machine took the bread from our mouths as it replaced the hook and crook I allus used. We grumbled when the threshing machine spoiled our winter's work swinging the flail.'

'What's that to do with haymaking?' Mary Ann said. ''Tis but June yet.'

'Ah,' Bill went on, 'what I was gwain to say if you'll listen is that none of the labourers of this parish has yet complained about the elevator. The elevator takes the grind out of stacking in the rick. No man minds pitching and loading the waggons but when the rick gets amus to the top of a forty-round ladder, then's when you want a bit more under yer belt to get the hay up to finish the roof off. But still,' he said, 'they ull still make good hay and the ewes ull lamb in March after my bones be still and straight again in St Barbara's churchyard. It's a long while, Mary Ann, since I first saw the light under the thatch in my cottage—now fell down. George IV was on the throne then. How long have the Queen bin on the throne now, Missus?'

'Sixty-three years,' she answered directly. 'Three years since

the last jubilee. I'll read the bit in the front of the parish magazine—that Rev Grant wrote:

> At Beckford the festivities on June 22nd in honour of the Queen were carried out with great heartiness. The cricketers played a match with zest and lunched at its close. At five all the inhabitants above the age of fifteen partook of a high tea. Ladies busied themselves afterwards cutting and serving sandwiches and on the following day what food yet remained was judiciously distributed among the poorer parishioners. The sports were presided over by Captain Freeman. If there was a weak point in the Beckford celebration it was the lack of inspiring music. A solitary fiddler did his best.'

Bill laughed as he ventured, 'I'll warrant that was Shadda Baker from Ayshon.'

Mary Ann, ignoring the interruption, read on:

> The young men and maidens danced gleefully. No band could be obtained that day as similar rejoicings were going on in all the neighbouring parishes. Several persons expressed the wish that a band might be formed at Beckford so that at future gatherings bright music might not be wanting. We must not omit to chronicle two acts of generosity. One hundred and two medals have been given by Messrs Smith Bros to parishioners under fifteen not attending school and a New Testamemt has been presented to every Beckford child by an anonymous lady.
>
> At Ashton the men and youths over fifteen dined together at one o'clock. The Vicar presided and kindly words were spoken by Messrs Baldwyn, Gill, Cormell, Slatter, Court and the doctor. Songs were sung and the village was enlivened by the Winchcombe Band.

'Ah, we stole a march on Beckford,' Bill interrupted.

'At four o'clock,' Mary read on, 'the women and children sat down to high tea.'

'High tea,' Bill remembered. 'You was there, Mother, you all fittled yourselves like blowed ticks. You yut until you could amus touch it. High tea,' he went on, 'reminds me of a chap I worked with as said that he was high bred and deep learned and another chap said, "Yus you be, you was bred up in a crows nest and learned down in the bottom of a well." That's the licker, ent it?'

'Do you want to hear the rest, William?' Mary Ann enquired.

'Oi, go on, me wench, the Queen won't have another Jubilee.'

Mary Ann finished her piece by quoting the Rev Grant's last words—'A programme of sports was gone through and dancing was kept up with spirit for some hours.' 'Yes, and that wasn't all as went on,' Bill chuckled. ' 'Tis like this, Mother,' he cleared his throat, looked his wife straight in the face. 'Where there is music there is dancing Where there's dancing there's the other thing among the young folk and several oss birds or bastard youngsters were started that night. One I mind a got the name Jubilee.'

While folk like Bill recalled the past century in the chimney corner, George pressed on with Fred Abel's haymaking.

Jim Bowman, who every morning filled the Groaten Road with motor bike fumes as he returned from his night at the Gas Works, had his work on the land, his daily work, well under control. His sisters and sister-in-law had picked his early peas, he dug his early potatoes, both Victor and Magnum Bonum, and marketed his produce at Evesham. True, he was still busy with strawberries, but his sister-in-law kept them picked into six-pound chips for market. Early potatoes he sold in osier peck sieves or baskets. That late June presented a problem to Jim and his dad. Neddy the donkey was getting too slow to take the produce to market. A lady in the village needed a quiet mount for her small children so, after a conflab as Bill described it, Neddy was sold for a pound a leg as a children's pet.

Parting with Neddy was not easy for Jim or his dad. Jim thought, as the grey stubborn draught animal of White Hart Cottage was led by strange hands down Ashton Street, that no more would he hear the hee haw from the stable as Neddy

brayed for his breakfast. Bill shed a tear as he hobbled over the flags to his chair. 'Thur bin a cross on a donkey's back ever since Christ rode on one afore he was crucified.'

'Never mind, Willum,' Mary Ann said, wiping his tears with her apron.

'No more trips to Winchcombe for young Jim. Dalled if I shall ever forget that,' the old man said. 'It was in 1898, P.C. Organ spent the day yer with me in the hovel drinking rhubarb wine, he went when he had had a gutsful, then summoned me the next day on the charge, "An ass straying on the highway". Our Jim appeared afore the Beaks, walked Dumbleton road to Winchcombe. We was fined sixpence and seven and six costs. Four 'osses belonging to Bostock was straying the same day. Organ turned a blind eye to that. That finished me giving wine to Bobbies.'

Jim, who had opened an account at the Capital and Counties Bank at Evesham, signed his first cheque when he bought the chestnut pony Polly at Evesham Fair for twenty pounds. A young fast mare which pulled the skim plough between his early runner beans and the bouting-out plough to mould his later potatoes. Daniels Dreadnought potato was reputed to yield fifteen tons per acre. They did well on the loam of Halfpenny Horn.

As George Bowman got Fred Abel's hay in good fettle he, young Ern Peart and Fred started the carrying. Abel's waggon creaked up Ashton Street loaded and roped as the yield of Crow Knell was pulled by Prince and Diamond to the rickyard. Jim passing on his motor-bike thought 'Fred Abel's been good to me, he is short of a man to get the hay in.'—'Could you do with a hand with the hay, Mr Abel?' Jim asked one morning as he welcomed the sun after a night in the heat stoking the retorts. 'Yes, my boy,' Mr Abel said. 'I know you can pitch and load, I saw you working at Bumbo when you were but a lad.'

'A bit of breakfast at Mother's and I'll be along,' Jim agreed. So with four men and three horses the pitching and loading went with a swing, but better still when Ernest Bradfield the thatcher came and gave a hand. Jim loaded the waggons while

Ernest and George pitched the hay from the cocks. Young Ern Peart walleyed up the hay in the next field with the side rake and turner and Fred Peart borrowed a horse off the Bostock's farm to double up with Boxer to mow another meadow. Waggons loaded, the men then started building the rick after tea. The rural scene in Abel's rickyard as the light failed and the sweat-soaked flannel shirts went cold on the men's backs was a building for the stock's winter feed, a rectangular base of sweet green dried herbage which grew with every waggon load. The trace horses pulled wisps of hay from roped loads. Then when night fell Fred Abel's cider flowed freely from the drink house barrel. Fred Peart made Jim a special pot of tea knowing well that a Salvationist drank no cider and in the kitchen there Jim and Mr Peart ate a supper of home-cured ham and eggs before Jim started his motor-bike to go once more into the black hole of the Gas works. The hay was carried by the end of the week. The two ricks stood barn-like in the rickyard. The new green hay would soon be like the new thatch on the village cottages, weathered and grey, but underneath the grey outside the sweetness of the green dry herbage awaited the winter's scarcity when the grass stopped growing and the cows stood all day long by the gate awaiting the evening feed in the cowshed manger, twisting their tongues around the sun-drenched, honey-scented fodder.

Men like Fred Peart and young Jim Bostock had little time for Club Feasts which were now in full swing around the villages. In the Plough yard Scarrott's Gipsy Horses and swing boats amused the young while the staid workers of the land lunched in a marquee in the Plough yard. The doctor took the chair. The Rev Grant wrote in the magazine that the day was marked by good humour and sobriety. He probably never knew that Harry Bowman got so drunk on the cider and beer from the farmers' hospitable mugs which lined the garden walls of Ashton on that day that he finished up in the school where he was locked in for the night as he sang 'Rule Britannia'. At Beckford a dinner was held in the large park. Near-by Alderton, who had

a brass band of their own for processions, was addressed by Rev Covey who said that England had been considered a nation of shopkeepers but when its men were called on they made excellent soldiers. A private who had been at the relief of Ladysmith replied to the toast 'The Imperial Forces'.

So with the annual Earth Stoppers Dinner at the Lygon when foot followers were told that they were welcome but asked not to sound the view halloo unless they saw the hunted fox and the hounds were not in full cry, June 1900 ended.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JULY

Hot July brings cooling showers, apricots and gillyflowers, but these delights were not for Miss Holland the Ashton head teacher, who wrote sternly in her log: 'I cannot make progress. Too many children away in the pea fields or some idle excuse!' While the Beckford head teacher recorded: 'I was unwell with a bilious attack; my absence caused unpleasantness between Miss Fifield and Miss Bywater, the former being unwilling for the latter to take the place of the head.'

'Several children away pea picking.'

'Mabel Blackley has breakings out on her face and legs and is unfit for school.'

At Beckford Stores the *Journal* advert read:

'Comforteth like sunshine after rain Hornimans Tea "always good".'

Farmers and labourers alike were able to take a breather between haymaking and harvest in July.

Fred Abel took advantage of this, Henry Newbolt's lines described him to a nicety:

With sanguine looks,
And rolling walk,
Among the rocks,
He loved to stalk,
But the dumb fields,
Desire his tread
And not earth yields
A wheat more red.

Jim Bowman, back at Halfpenny Horn after helping to gather

Abel's hay, stood on the Adlum (Headland) and straightened his back, looking proudly at the long straight rows of crimson blossom on his runner beans, the blue blossom on his potatoes, the green leaves of the Brussels sprouts drooping slightly in the hot sun. He gazed around him at Fred Abel's wheat turning gold, his near-by oats nodding and rustling in the breeze, rustling and waving together making a kind of seascape as the ears on the straw rippled as far as the eye could see. 'Men like me,' he thought, 'country men, were not born to spend night after night where the coal dust chokes and ammonia catches every breath. A few more years of hard graft round the clock and I'll be growing corn down Beckford's way.'

The evening passenger train from Birmingham coughed out of the village station hissing steam across the brook meadows. The milking cows ignored the black Midland engine as it moved faster along the iron road by Carrants Brook. The yearling cattle with tails erect ran round one circuit of the Hams. 'I'll hoe one more row of sprouts,' Jim thought, then spitting on the palms of his hands he grasped the ash hoe-stake and hoed until once more he mounted his Bradbury motor-bike for Evesham Gas Works.

Fred Burford, the man who owned the Promised Land, got his rick of hay in with the help of Syd Jackson from the Wood and Ernest the thatcher. He still had one more field left and Bill Bowman forecast rain. 'Our Jim wants it on his sprouts, and for cabbage and onion planting—the ground's fair parched,' he told his wife.

That evening at the White Hart, the cool bar was welcome as an oasis in the desert after a day when the old maids (horse flies) laid hold of bare arms and drew blood.

In the fields the bree fly had tormented cattle all day long as they ran tails erect under the hedges of the meadows burnt brown by the sun.

Burford had cut his last field. 'It's half made,' Frank Wheatcroft told the landlord.

Harry Bowman emptied his mug and turning to the company said, 'We ud get that hay together for Burford if he hadn't done

the dirty on us over the Promised Land.'

Frank Wheatcroft said, 'I'd a bin game too, Harry, but once bit twice shy. They tell me,' Frank went on, 'Fred Burford is lopping his withy trees up at Bumbo to fodder the cattle. Thur's no grass.'

A pint of cider now took old Bill Bowman the best part of an evening to get through. 'When you approaches eighty, fittle and drink don't worry you a lot.'

Then putting his mug on the table he said, 'Fred Burford won't get that field of hay together in any sort of fittle. Its a-gwain to rain, the weather is breaking-up.'

Sam O'Rourke the landlord was in agreement. 'I know the horse flies have bitten us today, and I've seen some of Burford's hay caught in a whirlwind, that does signify a change.'

George Bowman, back from Tewkesbury Market, met some of the village chaps outside the White Hart.

'How's the beef trade,' was his dad's first question. 'I bin told you took a useful bullock to market in Fred Abel's bull float.'

'We got a good price, Dad. The trade's flying. One butcher couldn't buy, he come up from Gloucester and the last beast in the ring was a screw, a wrong un, all skin and bone. The other butchers told this Gloucester chap to buy it. He said, "What? He is as thin as a hurdle." They said "Go on! If your customers be out when you delivers the meat you can always put that sort through the letter box." '

'Fred Burford was there and I overheard one farmer tell him that if you stirs a puddle up in the road you get mud, and "that's what you're like, a mud stirrer". They've got his measure at Tewkesbury.'

Bill Bowman's rheumaticky seventy nine-year-old legs cracked like sticks as he made his way upstairs that night. The sheet lightning over Broadway lit up his bedroom, and by early morning, as the first light appeared, spots of rain as big as half-crowns fell on the slabbed back yard.

George Bowman told his dad, 'It's apple christening day, St Swithin's, and it most generally rains.'

It rained for two days, refreshing Jim Bowman's sprouts,

setting the blossom on his runner beans, and soaking his onion bed. Halfpenny Horn looked better for the downpour.

As Bill sat cushioned in his fireside chair after tea, he asked Mary Ann his usual Friday question,

'What's in the *Journal*, Missus?'

She rocked in her chair as she read: 'A Professor of Greek of Oxford University has been summoned for sun bathing, indecently exposing his body for health reasons, not a member of the Whiteway Colony. Fined five shillings for taking a sunbath.'

' 'Course folks be getting different ideas now,' Bill carefully said. 'The sun is recorded to be like medicine, but I've allus bin brought up to believe it's dangerous to take off a flannel undershirt, it strikes cold else. What other news this wick?'

'Oh, a drunken pea picker from Cheltenham got six months for being drunk and assulting P.C. Organ ... Alice Ball got another bastardy order. That's the second, the first was a chap from King's Heath. Two shillings a week to pay.'

'He got a bicycle no doubt,' Bill said.

Fred Burford, Ernest the thatcher and Syd Jackson from Ashton Wood turned by hand the hay in his last meadow. As they shook out the swathes, wads of yellow wet grass just asked for the sun to dry it and make reasonable fodder. The weather remained sticky, hazy and no wind.

John Bostock lent Burford his tedding machine which spread the cut grass to dry. After another two days Fred Burford raked it into walleys and Ernest and Syd pitched tough hay into waggons, hay with wads of wet hay which the pitching shuppick was loath to enter.

They ricked it in the field away from the rickyard and Fred Burford lay awake at night just hoping that the rick would not get hot and fire.

As Shepherd Bradfield passed it each morning he saw the steam rise as the dawn broke. Puffs of steam from the side of the rick. He called on Fred Burford and warned him that if he didn't turn the rick it would fire, 'as sure as hell is full of parsons'.

Days went by when the weather improved, the sun shone

once more, but Fred Burford's hay had been harvested during a catchy spell of weather. At this point the whole village felt sorry for Fred. Ernest the thatcher pushed an iron rod into the middle of the rick. This half-inch round rod had an end to it like a fish hook, and by twisting the ten-foot rick tester and pulling it out of the rick centre it brought out a sample of hay, just a wisp, enough to tell the condition of the fodder.

The rod came out very hot the sample it brought smelt like twist tobacco. Ernest shook his head, took a ladder and climbed up into the top where the heat burnt the soles of his boots.

' 'Tis just a matter a time,' Bill Bowman observed, 'afore the fire.'

'Spontaneous combustion they calls it,' Ern Peart said.

Bill tapped the ground with his stick saying, 'This education beats me.'

Fred Burford was no fool so without waste of time he took a load of straw and rick pegs and Ernest thatched the very hot rick.

'When they been thatched,' Bill said, 'You can insure um.' According to the company's rules, Fred insured his ricks against fire. Fire that seemed most likely.

A fortnight after puffs of smoke, not steam, funnelled through the thatch, and soon a smouldering rick blazed on.

That July night Syd Jackson rode his nag to Tewkesbury to call the Brigade. Just after six they caught the Fire Brigade horses on Tewkesbury Ham and pulled the fire-engine hell for leather through Beckford up Rabbit Lane.

Trotting Johnny, the local photographer, stopped the team while he took a picture of the men in uniform. When the Brigade arrived at Burford's rick it was too late to save it. They pulled it apart with forks and damped it down.

It's been often said that a man who never made a hot rick never made any good hay. There are risks to take in stacking hay.

Fred Burford was courting a wealthy farmer's daughter from Elmley. His future father-in-law helped him with fodder the next winter, but his brother-in-law told him in Beckford

Market jokingly as Fred bemoaned the loss of his hay that when he got home and looked in the looking glass he would see the man who fired his rick.

Fred got married the following week to Mabel Giles and took on the brothers Ricketts as labourers.

But July in Ashton was not all worry over drought, over storms, over hot ricks—it had its lighter side.

Miss Hillier of The Close had a special interest in the young people; she taught several to play the piano and violin in the Cotswold-stone reading room up the steps near the Chapel; she started a Girls Friendly Society. Ah, a do-gooder you may think, but she was the right sort of do-gooder. Since Sir Walter Raleigh was soused with water when he smoked the first pipe of tobacco in England there have been opponents to the use of it at one time and another. Miss Hillier started the R.E.D.S. in Ashton at this time. This was a body of youths who promised never to smoke.

After signing a form of membership each lad was issued with a white badge with a golden rim and the letters R.E.D. printed on it in red. R.E.D. stood for Real in your promise, Example to others, Determined to keep it.

The R.E.D.S. met at The Close. They drank lemonade from a tap, which made some of the lads imagine there was a hidden lemonade spring somewhere on Bredon Hill. It's true to say she had a large reservoir of the stuff in her house which was piped to the kitchen.

After the meetings, once a week on summer evenings, the boys were taken by Miss Hillier to the Little Piece to play cricket. Then back for lemonade.

Who were The R.E.D.S.? Two of the Baker boys, two Hamptons, a Bradfield and some from the adjoining villages. R.E.D.S. were unique; no other village had such an organisation.

Miss Hillier meant well but was unable to prevent Henry Lamb being given a month's hard labour at Winchcombe Sessions for stealing one of John Bostock's ferrets and one of the doctor's ducks.

Bill Bowman's only comment when he heard the news was, 'I've seen um transported for as little as that in my time.'

The early promise of fruit in Ashton looked like coming true. Jim Bowman, who now had Polly, the useful cob, decided to sell the market cart and buy a new four-wheel dray from Evesham. A dray with the legend Jim Bowman, Market Gardener, Ashton-under-Hill printed in bold letters along each side.

'Can't thee take all the produce of Halfpenny Horn to Market on that kyart?' his father said.

'Yes, Dad,' replied Jim, 'but I'm going to do a bit of buying and selling.'

Those July evenings Jim could be seen looking up into the plum trees in Ashton's cottage gardens, trying to estimate how many hampers of early Rivers plums there were in widow Bradfield's garden, how many Jimmy Moores in the doctor's little orchard. He bought them green on the trees to pick later for market.

Eighteen hampers covered the bed of the dray, but soon he was picking the Rivers early prolifics, the hay plums, and stacking them two layers high on his dray. His sisters helped him pick the fruit and sometimes his brother George would have it in market at first light before work and before Jim came back from his stint at the Gas Works.

Jim's motor-bike, the only one in Ashton, his chestnut cob and dray were described by old Bill as a sight for sore eyes.

'As't thee got a skid pan on that new dray of yourn, Jim?' Bill asked his son. 'I'll tell you why,' he said. 'Charlie Backhouse has bin fined a shilling at Winchcombe for coming down the hill with the wheels of his waggon locked with the lock chain and no skid pan under the waggon tyre. They be hot on that offence. It plays hell with the road to come downhill like that with a narra wheeled waggon.'

'It's all right, Dad, we use the skid pan when we lock the dray wheel going down Sedgeberrow bank.'

The Ashton children were booked in the head teacher's log for continually staying away from school in the afternoons after

they had taken their fathers' dinner into the fields. The boys knew the footpaths, taking pudding basins of food and bottles of tea at one o'clock, then playing truant. Just a natural thing when the sun hung in the sky and flowers, butterflies and birds were abundant.

Bill Bowman made his slow trek, stick propelled, along Beckford's Way glancing at Halfpenny Horn, where the runner beans sang with the sound of bees. Bees which took honey to Jim's hives. Bill stopped and looked over the low hedge, noticing runner beans hanging from the holm like mouse's ears.

August Monday I reckon Jim ull be busy with his runners and the plums, Bill thought as he viewed Shepherd Bradfield folding Bostock's flock of Cotswold sheep in the hurdled pen at the top of the First Ham.

'I never did see anything whiter than your flock after the rain. The yows without that thick fleece reminds me a driven snow, unt that right, Shepherd?'

'Oi, Willum, it's a pleasant sight to see them nibbling the fresh green latermath of the brookside meadows, the lambs as ragged as forest ponies bunting their heads against the yows' bags to get the last spot of milk.'

Shepherd Bradfield and his dog Rosie persuaded the flock into the hurdled pen.

'Specks you be looking for maggots around the lambs' rumps now we have had the tempest,' Bill said. 'And I see you have got maggot water in the bottle under the hedge.'

'Ah, you be right Willum, the fly is very active this weather but if I can clip the muck off the tails of the worst of um, I'll cope.'

'One under the pollard ash I'll warrant a got a bunch,' Bill replied. 'See how he shakes his tail, picks his hind quarters up uneasy like and turns to bite at the varmints.'

The shepherd slid his crook above the knee joint of the lamb's left leg, gave it a slight twist the way the clock goes round, and the lamb came backward towards him, his left knee pushed against the lamb's groin until he was securely held against a hurdle in the pen.

The shepherd clipped the soiled wool from the rump . . .

'Pass the bottle, Willum,' he said. 'They be yur a bunch of the gentles as the anglers calls um.' As the maggot oil or maggot water was poured on the seething bunch they fell to the ground like November apples. The shepherd gently rubbed the last maggot out of the clipped wool. All the time the lamb gnashed his teeth partly in relief and partly due to the fact that the liquid caused his back to smart temporarily.

After the flock had been counted carefully through the half open hurdle, Bill and the shepherd went towards the village. In a young apple orchard Shepherd Bradfield showed Bill two shearling tups Mr Bostock had bought from Mr Garne at Aldsworth in the Cotswolds.

The tups or rams came to the gate the minute they saw Joe Bradfield, he had a pocket full of beans for them. Bill stared and exclaimed, 'I go to hell if they bun't dall near as tall as my donkey was. How much wool ull they shear next June?'

'Oi, almost fourteen pounds apiece,' Joe said.

There was really no need to tell Joe anything about sheep.

'It was the wool off these ship as paid for the building of many of the Cotswold churches, they do say,' Joe observed. 'Campden and the like.'

The men returned to the village, Bill labouring up the hill to White Hart Cottage. There the old man was met by Harry's children.

Lucy said, 'Is it right, Grandad, that the station master at Ashton has put a timetable up in the hen roost so that the hens will know when the train is coming? Jimmy Wheatcroft says he done it 'cause so many hens have been run over by the trains.'

The old man laughed as John added, 'One of the Bakers has had the nose bleed bad. The blood went right through the bolster. Dr Overthrow told his mother that it was a good job it bled or he might have gone off his yud else.'

'Trust the doctor to talk such as the likes a we. He's right though, my children. It's not so long ago bleeding was recommended for curing almost everything. Leeches they used.'

Mary Ann in the kitchen said, 'You had no right to frighten

the grandchildren so.'

'I'll tell you what, Missus, I bin with Joe Bradfield this morning and what he don't don't know about animals yun't worth knowing. I've sin him bleed on the nose end a ship as is giddy. They gets the gid at times and runs around in circles. Bleeding is supposed to relieve the pressure on the brain.'

'We have finished school for the summer, Grandad, and Uncle Jim has promised us to help him pick the plums.'

'All right,' the old man said, 'but careful climbing ladders.' And so closed July 1900, a month of ups and downs as all months are on the land, where there is poverty among plenty, rain on the late hay, bees among the beans and high summer.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AUGUST

JIM BOWMAN'S returns from Evesham Market for Ashton-grown produce were Runner Beans three shillings to three and ninepence per pot of forty pounds; Plums, Prolifics seven shillings to ten and ninepence per pot of seventy-two pounds.

Pershore one and three to three and three per pot of seventy-two pounds. So Polly the chestnut cob was earning her keep with the market dray. As old Bill said, 'Our George is a rare chap for the mornings. Sometimes he's in A'sum market with Jim's fruit afore the sun shines over Broddy.'

Very few in Ashton in 1900 grew market garden produce. There were of course the established Ayles Acre men who rented allotments off the Church. Landlord O'Rourke from the White Hart employed several labourers among the asparagus, strawberries and so forth. The other Sam from Evesham worked his four acres as his father had before him, but in the main, August meant corn growing and harvesting. Fred Abel bought the first binder to cut and tie the sheaves in Ashton parish, Messrs Meats of Cheltenham sent it out and a man with it to show George Bowman how to cut the wheat in the Broadenham. Folk talked of cost in sacks per acre, looked with awe at the knotter on this new machine. For hadn't corn been tied with straw band by the knot peculiar to Gloucestershire for centuries? Now came the binder twine to tie the sheaves inside.

'Bill Bowman's like a bear with a sore ass,' Snobby Tomkins announced in the White Hart.

'Why do you say that?' came the lilt of Landlord O'Rourke's voice.

' 'Cause he keeps hobbling round the cornfields rubbing the ears on every farm in the parish.'

'Look here, Snobby,' Harry Bowman squared up to him. 'Our

dad bin interested in corn and stock since afore your ass was as big as a shirt button.'

Snobby had spoken out of turn and realised it, so he emptied his mug and left the pub long before closing time.

As Bill came home weary to the kitchen cool of his cottage, he said to his wife that this week the *Evesham Journal* put in the harvest prospects. 'Just read us what the picture's like in Old Ayshon.'

> Harvest 1900. Mary Ann read: As harvest operations have now commenced in this parish the probable yield is naturally becoming the subject of greatest conversation. Meadow grass and clover both improved by June, so that when the machine was put to work there was a fair average crop of hay, and most of it got together in splendid condition at the minimum of cost.
>
> The wheat is patchy, there are some stunted ears, small, thin on the ground, short in straw. The yield will be several bags per acre less than 1899 or 1898.
>
> Barley below average and the tropical heat we have had this last fortnight has prematurely ripened it which will be a determent to the quality. Oats looked bad, have improved to average. Peas good picked green for market. Winter beans well podded, spring beans blighted, mangold swedes a good plant, rather late growing fast.
>
> The rain has come too late for the early potatoes but will be advantageous to the later sorts. Plenty of grass after the rain.
>
> Prospects good for wintering livestock.
>
> Apples half crop.

Bill wiped his hot brow and raised his eyes to Mary Ann saying, 'What did you read out of the Word on Sunday? "Summer and winter, seed time and harvest shall not cease." Other men follows on but as for me I be like the old Queen. It's doubtful if we shall see another harvest after this one.'

From Rev Grant down to the casual labourer, Ashton villagers were concerned with the corn harvest. Ern Peart with

bagging-hook and pickthank cut a road round Ramacre just wide enough for Fred Abel's new binder to cut the first swathe of wheat. Ern tied his sheaves with straw bands and stood them upright in the hedgerow out of the way of Fred's three-horse team. Prince and Diamond hitched to the binder pole with Boxer in traces as 'foremost'. Len Bowman on holiday from school rode the foremost horse for his Uncle George who sat behind the sails of the reaping machine with rope G.O. reins on the pole horses.

The binder knife agitated much more slowly than the knife of the hay mower, wheat straw cuts so much more easily than grass and the stubble is left longer, six inches long in fact.

'Hup, me boys,' George said to his horses, and the sails like sails on a windmill knocked the cut wheat into the moving canvas which carried it, up and over to the knotter. When the correct weight of wheat in the ear and straw accumulated against the knotter, a mechanical fork kicked the tied sheaf on to the stubble in neat rows.

Fred Abel and Ern then stooked the sheafs in stacks of eight for the final drying before they were carried by waggon to the rick.

A satisfying and tidy job, binding. Len's job involved riding Boxer straight out at each corner of the ground making him pull his weight and bringing him in a neat arc at each corner so that the corners were left cut square.

The occasional rabbit peeped through the standing grain into the stubble, changed its mind and retreated into the temporary safety of the standing corn.

George was anxious to finish the field in a day, then the rabbits would not escape.

As the sun sank low over the Malverns the square of uncut corn diminished to a mere acre. The rabbits began to bolt, tumbling over the sheaves. The village boys with sticks and stones killed them. Harvest rabbits three parts grown were made into pies by the village women, or fried and stewed by those who preferred them that way. The harvest of Fred Abel's corn meant a harvest of tasty meat for the meat-hungry labourers of Ash-

ton, the twelve shillings a week men.

R. L. Gales writes in *The Vanished Country Folk*: 'In describing their lives the shamefully abused metaphor of the taking up of the Cross is not out of place. Yet it seems true to say that they have often found it—this Cross of Working on the land co-operating with the great forces of Nature and serving her vast purpose—a very Tree of Life.'

The Spirit of the old folk was one of deep content and satisfaction in their work, a concentrated absorption in it and a pride in its efficient performance which spared no pains and no trouble, which did not murmur and looked for no reward beyond a bare subsistence, the 'wages' of going on till they fell at their post. Folk say 'They were happy'. Incredible as it seems, I am inclined to think that this is true.

Oh yes, the binder cut the corn, the horses hauled the sheaves to the ricks, the men built the ricks after pitching the sheaves and loading the waggons. Now in 1900, binder twine tied the sheaves, and only on the allotment land was corn at Ashton still cut by hook and crook, and the sheaves tied with straw bands.

It has been true that once the light of the sun and the moon have been replaced by the bright lights of the cities and men have received higher wages, young men in particular never come back to the land their fathers loved. Mary Ann, reading her usual *Journal* piece to Bill, was convinced that with the new education and the ease of travel by railway train, times were changing.

A Campden man now working in London writes of his life on the land. He says how carters and cowmen lived in rent-free cottages, but the day men had to lose time in wet weather, had no potato ground but did have extra harvest pay. Those who had boys at home who worked on the land were a little better off. Allotments had been shamefully neglected although promised in the Enclosure Act.

They still work (some of them) for ten shillings per week and two pounds extra for harvest.

He recalls working for two and sixpence per week at

plough, while an unmerciful woman tried when he was a hireling to beat something into his head with a thick stick.

His father, he said, had twelve shillings a week as foreman, but the farm changed hands bringing him an Irishman's rise to eleven shillings per week.

Joseph Arch arrived and got the rise to thirteen shillings per week.

The best of the young men, he says, are gone to the railways and soon there won't be a good man in Campden.

Farmers (he wrote) don't give holidays in case their workers may get about and learn too much. The holiday on Good Friday is supposed to be spent in church.

'It's pathetic, he says, to see young boys hopping clods at two and sixpence per week. Farmers soft soaped older boys by making them do men's work for seven and sixpence per week.

Bill Bowman said, 'Mother, it's true what the chap says. Thank God our Jim's a-gwain to have the privilege afore long of being independent.'

Mary Ann agreed, saying, 'Joseph Arch told us from the waggon when he spoke in Ashton street on his way to see the two ladies who kept the dame's school at Overbury that he was independent of squire and parson. He owned his own cottage at Barford, near Warwick. His father saved forty pounds in a stocking to buy it. But I haven't finished the piece in the paper yet. This Campden man has more to say to the likes of the young men who still live in Ashton.

'Binders, he says, can be bought for forty pounds, but when the weather knocks the corn down the men do the work of this enemy of the labourers, while the farmers grow fat and round like thirty-six-gallon barrels.'

'Plain speaking, Missus,' Bill said as he went to the cottage door. From there he could see his son George seated at the helm behind the sails of his binder in a distant cornfield, while his grandson Len rode Boxer traced to the pole, turning neatly at the field corner. 'It's all very well for folks as bin in the smoke of London to come back here and tell us what to do. Our cot-

tages, where the blue slate keeps out rain and snow, belongs to the farmers or landlords we work for. It's very different up in London, they do say. They can keep their gin. I'll stick to rhubarb wine.'

'There are lots of old folk in the parish who live in fear of the workhouse at Hampton Addlund,' Mary Ann reminded Bill. 'But we got no such fear. Our Jim ull see that never happens. We living, parted, in the Union, after our cosy room, doesn't bear thinking about.'

'Ah,' Bill replied, 'I loves my kettle, clock and fireplace, and the cat on the rag rug you made in the sixties. I harbours towards our household things.'

There was a lighter side to life in Ashton in that August. Fear of the workhouse, of the inevitable winter, fear of bad harvesting weather, was lightened by the Flower Shows. A cheap trip from Evesham to Pershore Flower Show by the steamer *Lily*, down the river Avon, was advertised in the *Journal*.

'What sort of a do are they putting on this year, Mary? Not as I shall be able to go,' Bill Bowman said.

Mary Ann adjusted her steel-rimmed spectacles, fingered the advert and read, 'Flat and tack races, Flower and Vegetable Show, Horse Jumping, Driving.'

Bill's mind went back to Pershore of his youth. He pictured the driving or trotting races by local farmers with their cobs. He caught the sun shining on brass and silver-mounted harness.

'Ah,' he said, 'to see the jet black, the chestnut and the greys, picking their forefeet up trotting round the ring did my heart good when I was but a lad. Do you remember young Miles from Ashton, Mary, when he won the penny-farthing bicycle race at Pershore?'

' 'Course I do,' she said. 'Wasn't that the year you popped the question as we saw the moon rise that night, as we lay on the burra [sheltered] side of Nehemiha's hayrick in the Gold Fields Brickhampton? And I hadn't got a bun in the oven neither. You bought the grandfather clock before I had Phoebe.'

As most of Ashton's corn, cut and tied by Abel's binder, stood in stooks up in aisles, or was already in, a rich harvest was

being gathered in as it always had been.

'I don't want to see another year like 1879, Gaffer,' Joe Bradfield said to Mr John Bostock. 'We was pitching wheat that year on Guy Fawkes' day. The water ran out of the ass of the waggon. When we threshed the following April the clouds of dust settled on every mantelpiece at the bottom of Ashton.'

Harry Bowman called at Bostock's Farm after work one Tuesday night in the latter part of August.

'Can you spare me for a day tomorrow? I'd like to take the missus and kids to Dumbleton Flower Show.'

'On one condition, Harry,' his master said. 'That you won't get so drunk that you'll be contrary, and no good for work on the Thursday.'

'I been't in the habit of that, Gaffer. Besides, Emma's in the family way. It udn't be fair on her for me to get plastered.'

Wednesday morning came bright and sunny, as Harry, Emma and family set out across the fields from Land Close.

'Most of the wheat's in rick,' he said, as he took the Dumbleton bridle path up the Thurness. 'See the oats gold in the stook,' he said to Lucy, 'just waiting.'

'Waiting for what, Dad?' his eldest daughter replied.

'For the church bells to ring the third time. You never carry oats until you a bin to church three times after cutting.'

The moorhens called to each other and the mallard took flight off the water as the Ashton family passed Dumbleton Brickyard Clay Hole.

'Look, Mother, what's that bird?' little John shouted, as on the cleared stubble of Cullabine Farm a heron stalked like a stilted schoolboy.

Harry laughed, saying, 'It takes a good climber to get to their nests when they build in the tallest of the elms.'

At the gate of the show ground, in bright, large letters, was a poster—60th Annual Flower Show at Dumbleton, Wednesday. Judges, Captain Case's gardener from Beckford Hall. Miss Burlingham's gardener from Evesham.

In the large marquee laid on trestle tables were the exhibition potatoes, white, yellow, purple-eyed, red-eyed, clean and match-

ing; flowers, larger than life and twice as natural. Mingled with their scent was the unmistakable smell of trodden grass and the canvas of the marquee. Pipe-smoking men leant over plates of Jimmy Moore plums. Plums with bloom like peaches. Polished red apples matched the red First Prize award cards.

'"Tis Bert Sallis's inons [onions] I be come to see,' Harry whispered to Emma. 'Bert worked with our Jim at the brickyard.'

At the end of the table with the red First Prize card on were Bert's onions.

'Bert have done it again on this Jubilee occasion of the Show,' Harry exclaimed.

Bert Sallis came up to the Bowmans.

Harry eyed him up and down, cleared his throat, and remarked, 'Bert, bist thee all right? I'm glad you have won the prize again.'

'Why, Harry, does anything look amiss about me?'

'Well, to tell you the certain truth,' Harry said, 'you looks just as if you had had a night on the tiles.'

Bert shuffled nervously as he cupped his mouth and whispered in Harry's ear, 'Finger blight.'

'Oh dear, 'tis like that up yeer now is it?' Harry replied.

Bert Sallis described how he had slept all night on his onion bed, guarding his show onions, just in case a neighbour came and stole some for the Show. As the Bowman family stood with Bert and admired the dinner plate of Tripoli onions as big and as colourful as purple-topped swedes, Bert explained that it was a year's work growing them from seed, and it had happened that some shameless neighbour in previous years had stolen onions and other vegetables from garden and allotment.

'You can do with a livener, Bert. You have got the prize.' With this Harry left his family in the marquee, taking Bert to where the cider flowed from the tapped barrels into the crocks, and the beer into pewter pots.

'Beer we be having today,' Harry said. 'It's eleven months, two weeks and a fortnight to the next Show.'

Harry returned to the marquee, heavy with the scent of

flowers. He and Emma went outside as the crowd increased. They sat down with their children, eating their midday lunch from Harry's frail basket. Emma, who had been in domestic service, had cut dainty sandwiches of cheese and cucumber for her and the children. They ate them watching their father deal with the top of a loaf, a lump of cheese, with his bone-handled sheaf knife. It was now Emma's turn to go to the refreshment tent and fetch cups of tea for her and the children.

Alderton Brass Band struck up their first tune, 'Soldiers of the Queen', from beneath the chestnut tree, where the white bloom had faded to brown and the hobbley honkers were already green in the husk.

'Pretty music, Mother,' Harry remarked. 'The Queen's soldiers ull soon be home from Africa I reckon.'

'Dad,' Lucy shouted above the noise of the band, 'that man there, he plays a trumpet like our Uncle Jim in the Salvation Army.'

'Uncle Jim plays a euphonium,' Harry replied knowingly.

'Let's see the races,' Len said, as the family finished their picnic.

Moving towards where the field was roped and pegged, and where whitewash lines marked the starting places, and flags the finish, the Bowmans watched the Dumbleton villagers run for money prizes.

' 'Tis to be hoped Jack Alvis is yeer for the open race meeting,' Harry thought, and at that moment Jack appeared from the beer tent.

The labourers of the land between Bredon and Cotswold in 1900 bought one pair of boots a year to last them through. They bought them about September with their harvest money. This ensured that they had waterproof footwear for each winter, so that when haymaking and harvest came their boots were worn thin. Dubbined hobnailed boots had to do for Sunday church, as few men could afford light 'tea drinkers' for Sundays. To run a hundred yards in hobnails is like putting a carthorse in the Derby.

When the whistle blew for the open race Jack Alvis said to Harry, 'Hold my cwot,' then to Polly, 'Hold my weskit.'

Jack was a lissom man. He sat on the grass near the hundred-yard starting line, unlaced his boots, took them off, and stood up again in his stockinged feet, raring to go.

'How many pints have you had, Jack?' Harry whispered.

'Only a couple, just a livener afore the race.'

'Right,' Harry said, 'I've got a tanner bet on you along of Bert Sallis, so put thee best foot first.'

Eight men from parishes around ran in the open race.

'On your marks,' the starter said, 'one, two, three, go!'

In seconds Jack Alvis passed the flag, bringing the honour of Dumbleton Flower Show's Open Race to Ashton.

'Now the bicycles, Emma.' Away they go, round the field. The Bowman family stood amazed at the speed of the men on two wheels.

The last race ended in disaster.

'The Last Bicycle Race at Dumbleton,' the *Journal* reported. 'Unfortunately two females were on the track, not noticing the race. They were run into by two of the competitors. The cyclists were thrown, lost their chance of a prize, but fortunately no one was hurt.'

Harry and family feasted their eyes on all that was to be seen at Dumbleton that August day, in a setting right for a village Flower Show. The farmers' cobs trotted around the tree-lined field with the park gently sloping up the hill towards the Hall (the Big House) and gardens.

'Tired they be, the little uns,' Emma said to Harry, as the sun went down and they followed again the bridle path to Land Close Cottage.

As Harry helped Emma over the Thurness stile she said, 'There ull be another un to bring up the fields next year. I'm like Shepherd Bradfield's ewes, I shan't be carrying this parcel next Easter.'

Dr Overthrow, countryman, sportsman, cowkeeper, maintained, all through his practice as Ashton Village doctor, that the village labourer more often than not started a new Ashtonian on

either Club Night or the night of Dumbleton Flower Show.

It happened in 1900. Jasper Hill took his sister, Charlotte, to the Show. Jasper came home early, having to be in the harvest field next day. He proudly walked along the much used bridle path, walking with his hoopla prize, a stick with a bone horse's head handle. So right for Jasper, a young man who worked with horses on and off the farm spending his summers in the harvest field, his winters driving a coal dray.

Charlotte was, as Mary Ann said, as innocent as innocent. She still believed that babies were found under gooseberry bushes, that men thought of nothing else but work and drink. Charlotte sipped the sweet cider in the evening cool with Charlie Martin. She felt benevolent towards him. She, a twenty-year-old body, where passions of desire had never stirred, no longer saw the blooms in the marquee. Charlie Martin suddenly became a prince. He bought her more cider in the tent. She floated across the grassy arena where the bicycles had raced. She held his hand as they took the bridle path. Charlie told her tales of his exploits in the London bars, of beautiful girls, but none so beautiful as she. Her peach-like cheeks turned bright red. With trembling lips she flung her arm around his waist. Charlie was a few years older. He knew the whims of women. Together they crossed Cullabine's stubble field. The mallard quacked, the moorhens chattered in the clay pits. The tawny owl, from its twilight bed in the pollard ash, too-whit, too-whu it went.

As Charlie held Charlotte's bosoms softly, he felt her heart beat faster under his palm.

'What shall we do, Charlie?' the Ashton virgin said. 'I feel so different. I think I love you.'

The ex-barman led his partner to a rick staddle in Thurness, a a rick foundation only two feet high, where the new laid sheaves of tomorrow's rick lay in circles, forming a nest-like centre. Here he laid this Ashton maid on the clean bright straw. Unconsciously they both laid the foundation of a spring baby. As the good doctor said, 'It's nature among the country folk.' Thousands of stars shone in the sky between Bredon Hill and Dumbleton Hill that warm night. How many Charlotte saw as

she seemingly floated among the feathery clouds we shall never know.

At Winchcombe Court the following spring, Charlotte Hill sued Charlie the barman for bastardy, and failed. An Ashton member of the bench suggested it was a standing job agin Thurness Stile. Charlotte maintained it was on the staddle.

As the flowers faded in the Show Marquee, so the leaves on the plum trees took on that tell-tale scorched look—the first signs of autumn. Soon the Prime damsons would show like black grapes on trees naked of leaves.

Jim Bowman's euphonium was already vamping 'All is safely gathered in' at Salvation Army Band practice, the Army being before the Church in their Harvest Festival. Harry Bowman, doubtful of Providence, said that he learned at school of the Rev Stephen Hawker conducting his first Festival *when* all was safely gathered in. 'Fred Burford's byuns [beans] be still under the stars yet,' he said.

When Ashton harvest was safely in barn and rick, the first August of the twentieth century had passed. The morning dew stayed later. The evening mists followed the snake-like course of Carrants Brook. The next day would be autumn.

CHAPTER NINE

SEPTEMBER

'THE POOR little craters!' Mary Ann said, as Fred Abel, John Bostock and Rev Grant showered the lead shot from their guns at a convoy of stubble-driven partridges.

Bill peered, with his wife, through the back window of White Hart Cottage, and added, 'I wish a winged bird ud drop in our garden. It's a long while since I smelt a larded partridge, straight from the oven. That was when I was able to go netting the stubbles, nights, along with Fred and Oliver. Lord, I was worried the time they got caught!'

Fred Bradfield and Oliver Hampton had been charged with night poaching. Bill Bostock, together with his brother, watched some wires they had set on Little Hill at one-thirty in the morning. The Bostocks were seen taking some of the rabbits which were caught in the wires, and they had several wires in their pockets. The poachers were fined ten shillings each, with sixteen shillings each costs.

'Once bit, twice shy,' Bill said. 'The partridges ull be wily and not nearly so tame when they have had the lead among um. They allus did say a good sportsman marked the bird he shot at, but Rev Grant couldn't do that. He couldn't hit a barn if he was inside him.'

As the children went back to school after the summer holiday the Ashton mistress seemed to have better attendance, Beckford had more problems with the staff than with the children. To quote the school log: 'Mary Fletcher, infant teacher, had her teeth out and then had to go to hospital to have her mouth seen to. She has complained for a week of this, and should have had it done early in the holidays. I do not think her strong enough for school work, so susceptible to colds, not much more use to me than a child. She knows nothing of drawing. Very poor at

object lessons. She has no confidence, and doesn't try to obtain any more. She is quiet and not much push in her.'

The following week Mary Fletcher went to a Cheltenham doctor who said she was suffering from constipation.

Poor Mary was dismissed at the next managers' meeting. One can't help noting here how uncharitable the head teacher showed up in her log and how the managers were swayed by her bias.

The next note in the log recorded scarlet fever at Teddington closing the school. This presented another problem for Beckford. Were the children, living midway between the school and Teddington at the Hands, to be allowed to attend? They attended.

Ashton's main feature, socially, in September, was the 1900 Harvest Supper. This was held in the Croft Barn in Fred Abel's orchard. Sam O'Rourke catered for the men whose muscle, sweat and know-how had ricked the sheaves of wheat and oats, the wads of barley and beans. The village farmers clubbed together to provide the feast. The barn, lantern-lit, with trestle tables in two rows down it the whole length, leaving a central aisle for the serving girls, showed off its fine timbers as never before. On wet days the farm men had swept and cleaned the inside of the building, climbing ladders from floor to eaves, from eaves to ridge, where the soft brooms dislodged cobwebs which looked as old as the barn itself.

It was between seven and eight o'clock when the first men arrived, seating themselves on benches up at the tables. The youths and plough boys who had helped with the harvest looked round the barn as people view old churches.

' 'Tis Tudor, the school governess told us last year,' one thirteen-year-old spoke up.

They looked at the timber joints marked by the old craftsmen, all numbered in Roman numerals.

'Why be um numbered?' Ern Peart asked George Bowman.

' 'Cause when the carpenters cut the timbers and jointed um 'twas done on the ground, laid out like, and offered afore it was built. Then they knew how to fit the joints.'

'I'm sure we are all thankful to God for such an abundant harvest,' Rev Grant said from a table known as the Top Table.

Harry Bowman grunted in disapproval, saying in a whisper to Frank Wheatcroft, 'It's we as have worked our guts out from ass hole to breakfast time.'

Frank said, 'Now shut thee rattle. He's a-gwain to say Grace.'

'We'll sing Grace, shall we?' the Parson said. 'Be present at our table, Lord . . .'

A piano had been put in position by the mangold pulper—it 'couldn't be moved'. Millie Bostock sat between the candles lighting up the music and played. The men sang, the servant girls stood around Millie and sang with her.

Dr Overthrow sat next the parson and Fred Abel. He and the parson in their frock-coats and buttoned boots showed up in contrast to the labourers and farmers.

The doctor took the chair and said how honoured he was to be with the harvesters and their wives, and what a spirit the farmers showed in providing such a get-together. In no time at all the servant girls and farmers' wives were setting plates of beef and vegetables in front of the men. Beef, to be sure, was a treat, as the only meat the labourers of Ashton tasted was pig meat and the poached rabbit. Fred Abel's knife took slivers off the huge joint, red and rare.

Frank Wheatcroft knowingly told his table neighbour, ' 'Tis a piece of biff off one of our gaffer's bullocks. He weighed about twelve hundredweight. The butcher hung what we be eating for over a wik. That's why it's so tender.'

'Nicely marbled and all,' Joe Bradfield added, 'and I've known the time when I could have ett the fat raw with home-baked bread.'

The taps in the trammed barrels of home-brewed beer and best cider filled the earthen jugs, and when the thirsty men had an empty mug on the board Fred Abel himself ran up the aisle pouring liquid refreshment for men and boys.

'Rabbit pie for those men who can manage it,' Mrs Burford said.

George Bowman said he was partial to some, adding, 'I've

heard as Mabel can make rabbit pie from the Elmley, chaps.'

As the men finished the first course and the puddings and the apple dumplings went round, old Bill Bowman couldn't help thinking of harvests past, of feasting in the old barn. Mr Abel had made a journey up to his cottage on purpose, so that the old man should not miss possibly the last feast at Croft Barn for him.

'Gentlemen, the Queen,' Dr Overthrow toasted, and every mug was raised in her honour.

Fred Abel toasted 'Our Ashton men serving in South Africa, soldier Bradfield and Hubert Porter.'

Walt, one of Giles' men from Elmley, had been invited over by Mabel, the daughter Fred Burford married; Walt, a lively chap, with raised eyebrows and a swaggering walk.

'Now, gentlemen,' the doctor announced, 'does anyone want any more?'

'Yes, I do,' Walt answered.

All eyes were turned on Walt as Frank Wheatcroft muttered, 'Greedy guts.'

Then Walt said, 'Oi, tomorrow.'

The girls now brought round a wicker basket of clay pipes. Men and boys took one each, then, as the tobacco jar was handed round, a blue haze of smoke played tricks in the lantern light, with beams like rainbows.

'Come on, Millie,' Harry Bowman shouted. 'Let's have "The Farmer's Boy".'

Millie obliged, and with thirst-laxed throats and full bellies the men raised the barn roof on the last line of each verse.

The doctor in the chair asked for a volunteer to sing 'The Hawthorn Tree', and poor old Snobby Tomkins laboured through that. The liquor had taken hold of Ern Peart, he was but a lad, and he insisted on reciting *The Wreck of the Hesperus*. Walt sang with gusto 'I love my dear mother the best', and Millie Bostock played and sang 'Drink to me only with thine eyes'.

'You knows what went on between her and that student chap up by Grafton Firs back in the summer,' Harry Bowman said to

Frank.

Frank puffed his clay, saying, 'I can guess. Her wants a man as bad as I wanted this fittle.'

'Clear the tables,' Fred Abel called, from the one at the top. 'We have the Bakers here tonight. First let me explain. The Bakers are a remnant of the old church orchestra. Shaddow Baker plays the first fiddle, his sons follow him, and brother Ben plays the cello. There's a string band for you. So on with the barn dances.'

A note from Millie, a rub of resin on the fiddle strings, and all Ashton made merry. They danced the dances of the Old Country, all joining in, except the Top Table, Bill Bowman and Snobby Tomkins. Ern Peart had one or two more mugs of beer, and he was soon asleep by Bill Bowman's seat.

Bill Bowman spoke to the doctor about his memories of the Queen's Coronation, the peasant revolt to machinery, the crimea, the Zulu War. Then, coming back near home, he said, 'I'll warrant our young Jim's as black as a Zulu now, shovelling coal at the Gas Works.'

'Jim must get more sleep,' the doctor said. 'I've seen him in Halfpenny Horn. Still, he's young.'

At twelve o'clock Millie Bostock played 'God Save the Queen', and the harvesting men of Ashton went to their humble cottages with the one bedroom and a landing, so common through the nineteenth century, and still with them as the twentieth dawned.

On the following Sunday Bill Bowman went, box-hatted, to chapel where the annual Harvest Festival took place. Emanuel Davis had walked around the hill from Pershore to conduct the morning service. He spoke of the abundance as he viewed the scene around the pulpit. Pumpkins big enough for Cinderella's coach. Marrows with texts carved on them at the growing stage. Texts which grew enormous with the marrows. The sheaves of wheat, Bill Bowman's sickle, the lump of coal and glass of water.

Emanuel emphasised the coming Great Harvest of Souls, when the sickle goes in for the last time. Welsh dramatic local

preacher Davis, after thumping Ashton's pulpit, dined at Grafton then walked to Eckington, preached there. Then over the famous Eckington Bridge and home to Pershore. About nineteen miles since morning light.

At St Barbara's the Festival was conducted by Rev Grant. His church had more flowers than vegetables. The ladies prided themselves on their arrangement. The font, which had special attention from Millie Bostock, was wreathed in Michaelmas daisies.

Grant's sermon had still the theme of 'Bless the Squire and his relations and keep us in our proper stations'.

Bill Bowman said to Mary Ann, as she read about Ruth and the gleaners from her Bible, 'Joseph Arch, when he came here in 1870, dealt a mortal blow to Grant's ideas.'

Mary Ann's eldest daughter, Lucy, who had been in domestic service in Derby, married a railwayman. Her first baby was due in September 1900, and in that month she came to the family home at Ashton. Jim met her off the Midland train at Ashton Station with his cob and dray. Bill stood at the cottage door as Lucy and her luggage were taken inside.

'I hope it will be a boy for my husband's sake. He so wants a son,' Lucy said.

'You bain't come yeer afore yeer time,' said Bill's remark. 'You'll be confined any day now, if I knows anything about it.'

That very night George had to fetch Betsy Bradfield. Betsy's role in Ashton's welfare was bringing babies into the world and laying out the dead.

Percy Baxter, named after his father, was born at one in the morning. He was a weakly little chap and was soon whimpering like a puppy.

Bill eyed his grandson, 'He unt long for this world,' he told Mary Ann.

The baby lingered on for four days and died.

Jim Bowman went to see Rev Grant at the vicarage to arrange the funeral.

'Let me see,' the autocratic cleric said, 'I've never baptised

that child. I shall not bury it nor let the corpse come inside St Barbara's Church.'

Jim was dumbfounded, thinking all the time what a good job his brother Harry had not been there. Running the risk of doing time at Gloucester Jail, Harry would have struck Grant.

Jim walked thoughtfully up Ashton Village that night. How glad he was to be a member of a body of men in the Salvation Army. What a literalist Rev Grant was, when all around the Church was becoming more tolerant, more realistic. 'If you have not Charity' were the words which constantly rang in his ears. To be right in the letter but wrong in the spirit was the Vicar's creed.

'He won't bury Lucy's baby, Mother,' Jim said as he entered the cottage.

'The heartless creature, and the poor little mortal,' Mary Ann sobbed out. She went to the tiny back bedroom to comfort Lucy.

'Don't you tell our Harry at Land Close. He'd murder old Grant,' Bill warned the family.

Jim had to be at the Gas Works for the night shift, but before he started his motor-bike, he promised the family he would see the Baptist minister at Evesham. This he did, and the minister came on the Ashchurch train to conduct the funeral. George Bowman took the little coffin down the village two days after on Jim's dray and a few members of the family followed. The minister met them at the churchyard and the innocent baby of a few days was buried beneath the wall on the north side of the tower.

Back at White Hart Cottage, Bill Bowman told his family, 'I reckon Grant is like me and Snobby Tomkins. We won't be wanting many more clean shirts. Now Richardson, he was the parson for the likes of us. True, he liked his drink, but many's the time he has helped Ashton's poor, when things were worse than today.'

'Didn't he help the Minetts as lived at the station yard, in the cottage by the old signal box?' Mary Ann said, as she sat with her arm around Lucy. 'Rev Richardson went down to that little

hovel of a place where they was breeding like ferrets, after Bertha Minett had got into double figures with her family and asked her why she was producing such a large family in so short a time.

'"'Tis like this, Vicar," said she, "it's that early morning goods train as comes up the incline".'

'The Vicar was puzzled until Bertha explained it passed her cottage at half past four, and her husband David daren't go to sleep again in case he overslept. It was too early to get up, so when the train woke them there was nothing else to do, but to . . . "I know, I know," the Vicar said.'

'What about that parson by Worcester?' George asked his father. 'The hunting chap.'

Bill Bowman was not easily drawn to tell this story, but the rhubarb wine spurred him on.

'Now I'll tell it once more, and it's the certain truth as sure as Bredon Hill's alive with rabbits. This man held a living by Worcester and his wife engaged a servant girl as is usual, to help run the house. It was quite a good position, as a rule, to go into service at a vicarage or rectory.'

'Go on, Dad,' George prompted.

Bill said, 'I'm telling this story now because our Harry's little uns unt yer. He got eight girls in the family way out of that village, each time paying a farm labourer ten pounds to marry them. His wife just could not keep him out of the bedroom. At last she had to get her servants from other villages, until he was brought home, to die, on a hurdle after breaking his back on the hunting field.'

Lucy, nursed by her mother, recovered from her loss and George took her to Ashton Station, with her few things, to catch the Birmingham train for Derby.

Jim continued with his work as night stoker at the Gas Works. The pound a week was regular, but how he longed to spend all his time and energy working the land at Halfpenny Horn and to extend his holding to Beckford way. His plums from the cottage garden were all marketed, but he stored some

keeping apples in the loft above the donkey stable in straw for winter.

'Drunken Wills I see you be keeping,' his father said.

'Yes, Dad, they do call them Warners King now. By Christmas they will go a nice yellow colour, and it's certainly the finest cooking apple today.'

'Funny thing,' Bill remarked, 'there is truth in the old saying, "Michaelmas and a little afore, half the apple's thrown away with the core. Christmas and a little bit after, if it's as sour as a crab it's 'Thank you master' ".'

A few evenings after, Harry Bowman called and announced that John Bostock was going to bust the stubbles in the Dean with the steam tackle. John Alvis had been around the Bredon Hill villages ploughing and scuffling for other farmers with Bostock's engine since harvest. The stubbles in the Dean were dry and hard. The chauns or cracks were deep and wide in the clay soil.

'It will come up as big as 'osses yuds,' Bill Bowman forecast. 'I've seen this caper before. Why don't he wait for the rain?'

'Because he wants to kill the squitch grass and docks.'

Next morning the two engines chuffed up the road pulling the big six-furrow plough and the cultivator. Jack Alvis drove the one, Frank Wheatcroft the other. The cottage window panes rattled as the black monsters went by. The schoolchildren were allowed to stand in line by the playground wall.

'We'll plough from the road end down to the railway,' Jack told Frank. 'Put your engine in position anant the gate, drop the plough alongside her and I'll take my engine down to the bottom headland, paying out the steel rope as I go.'

Harry Bowman came through the gate with three horses at length, pulling a load of water in the water cart. He drew alongside Frank's engine, Frank, dropping the hose pipe in the barrel, the engine pumping the water into the boiler. When half the water was in Harry's engine, he drove his team across the stubble to the bottom headland and filled up Jack's engine. The plough in working position, Frank gave the signal, tooting his whistle to Jack, who was about a quarter of a mile away. Jack's

engine puffs black smoke and grey steam as the cable tightens and the drum winch under the engine revolved, pulling the plough with the cable down the field. Frank's engine idled as he played out more slack to the watching Stodge, the steersman, holding the steering wheel on the cable plough, as it silently turned over six furrows of stubble.

Jack Alvis soon realised that pulling a great six-furrow plough through the baked clay demanded that his traction engine maintained a good pressure of steam. 'Chuff, chuff, chuff', she answered as he opened the regulator, sending sparks and soot out of the long smoke-stack. The steel rope reeled itself round the drum under the engine, shining silver bright, bringing Stodge and the plough nearer to the bottom headland. In midfield the steersman kept his eye on Jack's engine, his plough throwing up great clods of clay, which stood up just for a moment behind the ploughshares, then were pushed aside in broken rows by the shell boards or mould boards. On the headland Jack Alvis's engine drew the plough to a stop, Stodge tipped it ready to go in the reverse fashion up the field. Stodge dismounted, while Jack, with his engine regulator open enough for a responding 'Chuff, chuff, chuff', drove along the headland six furrows' width. The plough in position, Stodge mounted the reverse seat, Jack gave one toot on his whistle, Frank gave two toots—message received—and as Jack's engine played out the cable, Frank's started winding as Stodge headed once more towards the roadway.

This to and fro ploughing went on until the field was finished, George Bowman busy with the water cart to supply the engine boilers and the coal cart to bring steam coal for the fire boxes.

Three toots on the whistle meant more water wanted and four toots more coal.

Prince and Diamond were filler or shaft horses and foremost on the water cart, Boxer in traces worked in the middle. He, like many more horses, disliked the hiss of steam and puffs of smoke.

Every time the three-horse team neared the engines Boxer laid his ears and shied away from the iron monster, as long as

Diamond kept his traces tight Boxer was kept in position in the team.

On one journey with the water cart George found himself in a very awkward position with Boxer. The hiss of steam caused the horse to rear up and shy towards a withy tree. He landed with one front leg trapped across a withy bough which overhung the headland. It was a little time before the bough could be sawn off and Boxer released.

Stodge travelled every morning from Sedgeberrow. As he climbed Sedgeberrow bank in half light of morning the thrushes seemed to call to him from the hedges 'Stick it, Stodge. Stick it, Stodge.'

After ploughing, the land was scuffled with the cultivator, 'Clats as big as 'osses yuds,' Stodge said there were as he rode the iron frame and steered it as the teeth turned over the clods of clay. 'Not just bacon rashers but pieces like joints of biff I lost off my knuckles when the steering wheel was whipped out of my hands and they hit the ironwork.'

'The frost ull lax it and the clats of clay will change into a deep mould in the spring,' Bill Bowman remarked from the gateway. 'Ah, frost, 'tis better than any implement to make the ground work,' he added.

Jim Bowman's Halfpenny Horn field was not large enough for the steam tackle and for another thing his method of cultivation was such that only part of his field was vacant or fallow at a time.

As the first frosts of autumn killed his summer beans he lightly skimmed the land and planted spring cabbage.

Back at his cottage old Bill wished he could sit and read the *Journal* at the weekends, but had to rely on Mary Ann, sitting bespectacled the other side of the oven grate, to tell him the local news.

'I see two chaps, William Cook and Arthur Weeks, were summoned for refusing to break stones at Pershore Workhouse. The prosecutor said they were of no fixed abode and should be made an example.'

The workhouse master at Pershore knows tramps like Sam Weller knows London. His instructions are to give stone-breaking to able-bodied, not honest wayfarers seeking work. Care must be taken that this cruel punishment is not given to a man incapable of doing it.

The men were given one month's hard labour. The tramps at Pershore have to break twelve hundredweight of stone before going on their way.

One tramp at Dudley, it was stated, who was unused to work took thirty-six hours to break thirteen hundredweight.

Bill stared blankly at the clock as it ticked towards his nine o'clock bedtime. 'Missus,' he said, 'It's a hard life carrying an empty belly along the turnpike road. Many's the time I've given a crust of bread to these poor chaps.'

So with the days shortening, the sun losing some of its power, swallows lined the telegraph wires alongside the railroad ready for their flight southward for a warmer land, free from ice and snow of the coming winter at Ashton.

September ended with ploughed land still hard and dry stubbles still the feeding ground of partridges; pheasants ventured from the acorn meals in the woods to sample the windfall apples of orchards.

CHAPTER TEN

OCTOBER

'A'SUM MOP in a feow days,' Bill Bowman reminded Josey Bradfield, as they sat together on the outside bench at the White Hart.

'Oi,' Josey said. 'That don't bring back happy memories for me Bill. 'Twas this a road, I went there as a bwoy of twelve and took the shilling or fasting penny being hired out to a heartless farmer, out Bromsgrove road six days a wick we worked. The fittle was poor. He even sent me to plough with two horses on me own at twelve years old.

'There I was, ragged hungry and lonely I stuck it through the winter and summer, then the carter warned me that this yur farmer tried his utmost to get the bwoys to run away after eleven months by ill-treating them, then he didn't have to pay them the two pounds for the year's work.'

'What did you do then, Josey?' Bill had heard this sort of story before.

Josey Bradfield called to Landlord O'Rourke, 'A pint of cider for Bill.' None for himself as he wore the blue ribbon since signing the pledge. 'Well,' Josey went on, 'the farmer's wife bought me cider sop for breakfast. I left it and went empty bellied to work. This was after I bin there eleven months and a fortnight. The cider sop was there for dinner, and tea, and the next day until tea time. Now you knows, Willum, we Bradfields be men of spirit. We allus work, we allus pays, and when it comes to using our fists that don't come amiss.'

Bill nodded.

Josey went on: 'That tea-time I smacked the basin of sop on the flagstones of the kitchen floor. The farmer came in and his wife threatening me with a beating. I ups with the poker, me a twelve-year-old, with a difference mind, Bill, my name was

Bradfield. "I'll split yer yud open the pair of you," I told the farmer and his wife. The squaling 'ooman went to the cellar, the farmer locked me in the kitchen and as my hobnailed boots tabbered the woodwork of the door the panes of glass in the windows rattled, and they was afraid of me, and the poker.

'Next morning the farmer said, "Get your box out into the road." If I had, Willum, I'd never had my two pounds, so I said "When I've bin paid." And it's the certain truth that I was the first bwoy that the farmer had ever paid. All the rest went at eleven months.'

'Right's right and might's might and wrong's no man's right,' said Bill.

Over his cider Bill thought and wondered why the Bradfields had been such strong upright men. Men fit for the Grenadier Guards, civil men until they were upset by injustice.

Back at White Hart Cottage Bill tapped his weather glass and rain was predicted next morning. The sky at sunrise was coloured by streaks of red over Broadway Tower.

'The wind's in a different quarter,' Bill told his wife. 'It smells like rain.'

As the great flocks of starlings crossed the village at the edge of night to sleep in Cropthorne Brake, the first spots of rain fell. By morning, when Fred Abel's field had a stale fine mould, the land was moist enough for the winter-sown wheat to be planted.

George Bowman took Prince and Diamond with the five-furrow drill to Hoedown where the wheat was to be planted. Working as a pair, double on the drill—Ern Peart leading the nearside horse—straight patterns of five channels soon showed up on the bare earth.

Fred Abel borrowed one of Bostock's horses to work beside Boxer pulling zig-zag harrows behind the drill. Fred walked steadily holding the rope reins as the harrows covered the lines of drilled wheat.

'Can't you leave nobody alone to get on with your work without leaning over the field gate?' Mary Ann said to her husband, Bill, adding, 'I daresay our George ull put the wheat in the ground the right way without your advice.'

Bill ambled to the Hoedown, told Mr Abel he 'allus liked to see the clay planted before A'sum Mop. Once it gets too wet it can be the devil's own job.'

By afternoon the ground steamed behind the harrows as the wind and watery sun dried the top.

Soon after the field was drilled it was Mop day at Evesham. The school log book recorded a poor attendance on the Friday afternoon as children caught the two-twenty p.m. for town and the fun of the fair.

The Ashton men went *en bloc* on the Saturday, buying their winter boots from Wyles and Wheatleys. Tasting roast beef off the spit as the beast was cooked outside The King's Head. Then they sampled the various brews of beer getting more and more confident that the Ashton men were without equal with their fists as well as at work.

Harry Bowman challenged the best man there was to fight him outside the Red Horse. Harry was as hard as nails. He had fought the bullies at the Wakes and club feasts and soon gained respect among local lads at the Mop. It was only the persuasion of his friends which prevented him from having a go at the boxing booth where some punch-drunk heavyweight with a cauliflower ear was taking on all comers.

The Ashton party walked back over the field footpaths. George Bowman, still a batchelor, got chuckled at for having pinched the Fat Lady to see if she was real flesh.

'Our Dad,' he said, 'talks of going to the Mop just after the Zulu War, and seeing Zulu prisoners in cages pulling faces through bars.'

'Yes,' Frank Wheatcroft said, 'that was summat to dream about after having a gutsful of beer.'

'Where is young Ern Peart?' George asked. 'It is to be hoped he unt gone astray. Still, tomorrow is Sunday though we shall want him Monday morning prompt.'

Ern, who lived in at Abel's house, had never seen the bright lights, just the sun, moon and the stars. The beer made him feel gallus. Despite buying a pair of boots he still had harvest money left. He had been left standing listening to the music of the

steam organ. Giddy with the round of bouts, heady with beer, he didn't care what time it was or that he was five miles from home. As he listened to the music a dark-haired girl, olive-skinned, said, 'Are you on your own, boy? It's a lovely night. I travel with the show people, we live in a caravan on the green when we are here.'

'Take a stroll to the ferry,' Ern suggested.

'Ya, I'd love to with a hansome chap like you.'

Together down Boat Lane the farm chap from Abel's place went with the gipsy girl. The organ music died away, and all was quiet apart from the rattle of the midnight goods trains, pulling up Hampton Bank.

By the ferry where the rope crossed the Avon the meadows were lush and dewy, lush with October aftermath, as they sat on Ern's topcoat on the river edge. The still, mild night surfaced the fresh fish which popped in and out of the water, under the moon the young couple could see eddies of disturbed river water made by the fish. The lights of the Mop went out. The organ stopped. Ern had the sudden urge to become a travelling man.

'If you would marry me,' Ruth Boswell said, 'our people would give us a van, you work with horses, Ern, we would travel the fair together.' It was three in the morning when Ern and Ruth said their good nights promising to meet on the morrow on Merstow Green.

Ruth ran up Boat Lane, Ern untied the ferry boat and grasping the rope pulled himself in the flat-bottomed craft to the Hampton Bank. He arrived at Abel's place about half past four in the morning, and finished the hours of darkness in the hay tallet.

Sunday morning he packed his box, told Mr Abel what he was about doing and took the turnpike road to Evesham. No more was ever seen of Ern Peart, but Ashton tongues wagged, from Bill Bowman down to the children at school.

Mary Ann at the cottage was shocked when she heard what Ern said. 'Don't care,' she said, 'has led many a man to the gallows.'

Bill, who knew Evesham gardeners, also knew how they

poached rabbits on Bredon Hill autumn nights with their long nets and their whippets.

'Ah,' he said, 'I minds the time when the A'sum men was poaching the Duke's covers. Two brothers being at *'Ooster* when the gamekeeper was killed with a stick. The brothers was friends of our Jim and often stood in the Salvation Army ring with him, they never struck the blow. 'Twas done by a hobbledehoy of seventeen years old.' Mary Ann sighed as she hoped that Ern would keep straight. 'Passion is a terrible thing,' she said.

Bill grinned. 'You forget the bit about the one brother as went to work in Brummigum. It was a devil of a while afore they found him. They sent a bobby up from A'sum to visit the pubs, he sung in pubs allus the same song "Don't put my Father's picture up for sale". 'Twas Saltley where they picked him up at last.'

Soon Evesham Mop, Ern Peart, were forgotten, as the daily work on Ashton land kept pace with the shortening days.

Joe Bradfield turned out the raddled tups with Bostock's ewes. One tup to every forty ewes.

On dewy mornings as the sun rose, the dew-dropped cobwebs on the lattermath leys looked like fine lace, a rare sight to see on a promising morning, Joe thought. As the rams followed the mating ewes. ' 'Tis in the spring a young man's fancy turns to love,' he told Frank Wheatcroft, 'but my yows don't want to do no trade until the autumn.'

'Spring,' Joe said. 'It's spring all the year with Syd Jackson's daughter from the wood. Somebody ravished her, some says it was old Snobby Tomkins for a pint a cider. Anyway I see her a-gwain big-bellied down the road. Her won't be better till her's worse.'

Towards the end of October the early frosts loosened the cider apples. The high winds scattered Ashton Orchards' grass with the red and gold of Fox Whelps, Tauntons Bitter Sweets, while the hedgerow pear trees shed their load of Malvern Hills Red Horse on the roadside verges. Cottage folk turned over in their beds to the plop plop of fruit on garden hovels. Surely the

vineyards of Spain could not produce such activity in so short a time as the wine of the west did in Ashton.

Dr Overthrow was a great believer in cider to be drunk by the labourers with their gross fat bacon, in the same way as apple sauce appeared on the table when the upper classes ate pork. He prescribed it hotted with a red-hot poker and laced with rosemary to clear chesty colds.

Four cider mills worked through the autumn days until Christmas at Ashton. Picked horses harnessed to the huge stones walked in circles until the apples were crushed to a pulp. Even the pips crushed under the millstone lay soggy among the golden juice in the cider mill circular trough.

The men carried wooden buckets full of pulp to the presses where in layers between clean straw the screw pressed it into flat circular cheeses as the amber liquid flowed into tubs.

Fred Burford of Bumbo was in the habit of having his cider made at Evesham. The brothers Ricketts took his fruit by the waggon load to the Fleece yard where the fresh-emptied rum barrels gave extra power to the ferment. Here perry from the vale pears equalled champagne, here men got drunk as they swilled and cleaned Harry Partridge's ten-hogshead barrel. They swayed on the ladder inside as the giant cask was made ready for another year's bounty.

'Did ever thee see a ten-hogshead barrel?' the Ricketts chaps said to Bill Bowman, who surely had seen most things between Bredon and Cotswold this last seventy years. Bill was dubious until the story unfolded of Harry Partridge and the elephant. Every year after the excitement of the Mop had died away, the circus came to Evesham, the Salvation Army Band played on one evening outside the Fleece yard, the usual circle of followers of brass, blood and fire gathered.

Catherine Eastwood stood in the ring with Jim Bowman, who played his euphonium. The Evesham children had seen the elephants walk trunk to tail from the station to the Fleece yard. Mr Partridge had left his ten-hogshead barrel full of prime cider near his back door. When an elephant is thirsty it takes more than a few pints to satisfy him. One such animal filled himself

from the barrel, then turned round and with tail erect left in there a different sort of manure from the one Evesham gardeners used—elephant manure. Harry was furious. He grabbed the elephant's tail, beat him with his walking stick causing the jungle beast to turn on him. The elephant chased him into his pub. Harry escaped death by inches and next year was afraid to cross the Fleece yard at circus time. The cider-drunk elephant ignored the Salvation Army Band, trumpeting his way back to the circus tent.

Although cider making in Ashton provided work in the autumn for some of the men, the drilling of winter wheat continued through the month of October. Conical heaps of seed wheat were spread on the flags of the village barns, sprinkled with vitriol and turned with shovels.

Vitriol was supposed to ward off diseases such as stinking smut and rust in the sown wheat, but each evening as George and Harry Bowman put away their shovels after dressing Bostock's and Abel's seed they drew the sign of the cross with a shuppick stake on the wheat just to keep the devil away.

Arthur Jones straight from school filled Ern Peart's place at Abel's farm.

'Keep a straight mark,' George told him as he led the horses on Abel's drill doing the bouts headland to headland.

As Joe Bradfield penned his ewes, when the dew steamed up off their backs in the early morning, he caught the tups and sat them up like begging dogs. Sat them up for their daily plaster of red raddle mixed with oil to a paste. Raddle which told all that walked Bostock's hill fields which of the ewes had been with the tup.

The round red patch on the rounded rumps of the ewes was there to stay till lambing time. After two or three weeks the shepherd changed the colour to blue. The red marked ewes lambed first, the blue ones later. As Bradfield's cord breeches were damped every morning by the wet growing fleeces of the tups, he heard the yearling cattle cough over the hedge. 'Them young aifers and steers be coughing smartish, master,' he told John Bostock. 'Thur eyes runs making brown stains down their

white faces. 'Tis husk, to be sure.' Harry Bowman knew that young stock in October were tormented by the worm in the windpipe so he and Frank Wheatcroft fetched them down out of the fields where the cobwebs were supposed to cause the coughing, into his yard. As every young beast was held by the horns with a rope, Harry and Joe helped Mr Bostock give them medicine up each nostril to kill the husk worm. Hartshorn linseed oil made their eyes run while it ran down the windpipe to the worm.

'Dry fittle they wants now, not frosted grass,' Harry Bowman agreed with his master. 'A good bed as good as fittle, and drink,' Joe Bradfield added as the men littered the yard with wheat straw.

Mr Bostock then sent Harry to the station with a telegram to a Gloucester cattle-cake merchant: it read, 'Please send as soon as possible a truck of slab cattle-cake, half linseed and half cotton.'

Some days after, the station porter called at Bostock's Farm with news that a truck of cake was in Ashton siding from Gloucester. Bostock's horses, waggons and men soon had it safe under cover in the granary.

The cake kibbler stood on its four legs on the stone floor near the stack of cattle food. On a wet day Harry, Frank and Joe turned the handle on the wheel of this machine and the kibbled waste of cotton and linseed dribbled into the bushel measure near by.

'Yer comes old Bill Bowman,' the shepherd said.

As the rain dripped off the walnut trees which circled the granary, 'Half and half I see you be giving the yearlings,' he said. 'You won't beat it neither. The linseed ull make thur coats shine as slick as oonts. The cotton ull stop scouring when they eats the turnips. The Ashton farmers be very trusting, I must say,' he said as he sheltered by the cake. 'I see Master Bostock has got his turnip field in the village. Now years ago turnips were planted well away because the labouring chaps liked a turnip with a poached rabbit and the farmers didn't want it made too easy to take a few home.

'Dall it, I've sin the time when men went to Beckford Petty Sessions for turnip stealing.'

The old man sat on a stack of cattle-cake as he related how Joseph Arch came and started the Union. Arch owned his cottage out Stratford road, and when he got to Parliament some of the radicals pulled him through his native village in a waggon. One chap asked the blacksmith 'a rank old Tory', if they could borrow a rope to pull the waggon; 'Yes,' he said, 'if it's to hang him with but no other purpose.'

The missus read out of this week's *Journal* that, 'The General's son came home to Elmley on furlough from the war. The Elmley chaps, one was the gamekeeper, hooked the nag out of the trap as he got to Bess Cap on his road from Pershore Station and pulled the cart through Elmley Street. A fine military family lives at the big house at Elmley . . .' Just at that moment the schoolchildren left school for the day, raced down the street to gather the fallen walnuts under the roadside trees.

Lucy, Billy, Len and John Bowman passed the granary and the old man, typical of his age and station, wondered what the world would be like when they were nearly eighty years to heaven.

Down at Land Close Emma Bowman prepared the evening meal as the water ran down the wheel ruts in front of the house. Her four wet-through children with walnut-stained hands kicked off their laced boots wet and soggy in front of the fire.

'Get clean, tidy and dry afore your father comes home,' Emma puffed out breathless, her unborn child hanging heavy under her stays.

'Our cousins up at Grafton be supposed to have chickenpox,' Lucy told her mother.

'Oi, and the Governess saw them this afternoon out in the churchyard a-watching a funeral.'

'Don't you let me hear of you going up there. You know your Dad don't get on with the parson.'

'No, Mam,' Len said. 'But the Governess says as we can have tomorrow afternoon off to go to a Chapel treat.'

It will be a treat for them, she thought, as Harry came in to

drink the stewed tea off the hob and eat the warm stew of garden vegetables from the oven.

'Another mouth to feed next year, Emma,' he said, as he tried unsuccessfully to get his arm around her gussetted waist. 'I bin thinking about our growing family,' he added. 'Our Dad worries me when he talks of the hungry forties. It won't come to that with us, will it, Emma?'

'No,' she said with assurance. 'If we can winter again all right the young uns ull earn a few coppers in the pea fields.'

At the Chapel treat of October 1900 Emanuel the roadman presided as the girl and boy dissenters of the parish ate the raspberry-jam-filled doughnuts and drank the urned tea. Tea they had been denied at village cricket matches where the parson saw to it that only children of the establishment shared in the leftovers from the cricketers' tea.

Old ways, old customs, die hard but as the twentieth century was under way the Rev Grant was succeeded by a parson who was described by the villagers as 'one of us', one who shared the sorrows and joys of the parish, not as one aloft but a humble man.

Emanuel with his fellow followers, Liberal, radical, fulfilled a need the common people enjoyed without being in any way indebted to some demi-god. True the harmonium did not compare with the piped organ of some abbey. The choir were labouring men, youths, women and girls of the land and household service, their voices much more fitted to calling the cows, driving the horses, scaring the crows. Sankey's songs and solos were sung with gusto in the Welsh-like Chapel of the village. Truly these were men of their time as Hallowe'en ended in October 1900.

The Bakers with their string instruments blended with the harmonium added to the non-conformity. If Joe Baker liked a chorus, as he bowed his cello he would announce, 'Let's have it again,' and it was repeated.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

NOVEMBER

'If November's ice is strong enough to bear a duck, the winter will be nothing more than mud and muck,' Bill Bowman said as he watched the doctor's ducks skating on the horse pond.

The cold mornings following were of white, rimy frost and fog. Mornings when the breath of the plough teams of four horses at length blew into the cruppers of the horse in front. Echoing mornings of still air as Shepherd Bradfield's voice sounded clear of the hill when he spoke to his dog.

Mr Abel and Mr Bostock gave permission for the boys of the village to collect fallen boughs off the hedgerow trees and build a bonfire in the Little Seeds. Fred Abel called at the school to ask the Governess to tell the children they were not to pull bonfire wood from the hedges and make gaps for the stock to get through. The Little Seeds was the field at the back of Bill Bowman's house. He watched with interest the building of the bonfire for Guy Fawkes night.

The darkening mornings of November made it necessary for George Bowman to go lantern-lit to the horse field to get his team for early morning bait. How willingly the horses stable at this time of the year!—no need to entice the haltered shires with a handful of beans before they unwillingly left sweet summer grass. More often than not George found his horses looking for him over the field gate, eager for the warm stable, the chaff and oats and clover. How they turned their heads from the manger when they heard the clank of the iron lid of the corn bin! What a crunch of their teeth when they ate the swede turnips! Then when George ascended the upright tallet ladder to pitchfork more clover into the hay rack, their eyes followed him, their ears listened to every movement on the first floor of the stable.

Over at Bostock's place Harry Bowman foddered the outlying cattle on the Leasow. He cut kerves of hay from the field ricks with the hay knife. The square kerves were more compressed as his cut from the rick could be reached without his thirty-round ladder.

Sticking his shuppick into sections as far as the grains or prongs would enter, he slid the kerf like a square hay mattress to the edge of the rick, then carried it through the gate, across the field, followed and bunted by the hay-pulling cattle, cattle which the lush meadow grass of next summer would fatten for beef.

Harry didn't take his first forkful too far; they won't pester me next time then, he thought, when they have got some fodder to eat.

Twenty cattle would eat five kerves scattered in a line on top of the land.

'Some farmers supply a cart or float for this caper,' he thought, 'but Bostock ull never alter at his time a life.'

Harry was his own boss on the Leasow. No foreman was timing him as he walked back past his night-before-set rabbit wires, and picked up two of the one thing the Romans introduced to these islands for the village labourers: Bredon Hill rabbits to go in the stew jar with turnips, carrots, onions. If John Bostock had known, it's doubtful if he would have sacked him. Harry was at beck and call weekday and Sunday, and was considered the best man with livestock in Ashton village.

As he fed the cattle and cropped the hedges, his brother Jim was busy sprout-picking in Halfpenny Horn. He loaded his dray with sprouts, parsnips and a few pot hampers of stored apples and drove Polly the cob to Evesham Market in the later afternoon. He stabled Polly at Catherine Eastwood's father's stable in Cole Street and after a meal with Catherine he walked down Mill Bank to the Gas Works for another night shovelling coal into retorts. Jim and Catherine didn't see as much of each other as they would have liked, except at Salvation Army Knee Drill on Sunday where Catherine was 'Young People's Sergeant Major'. The Army Band had very strict rules and once a soldier

had signed 'The Articles of War' the rules had to be abided by. One of Jim's friends stoked up a fire on his allotment on Sunday and was suspended for a time for working on Sunday. Booth's discipline was army discipline, it was as simple as that.

'You are killing yourself working night and day,' Catherine said to Jim. 'Is it necessary?' Jim looked at his Pass Book from the bank and promised Catherine that when he had made more money the following year he intended to rent a farm, and he asked her to marry him. Catherine was delighted and accepted the diamond ring. She worked hard as a seamstress making riding habits for the side-saddle ladies. She made them for duchesses and queens from the European capitals when they stayed at the Duke of Orleans' country house overlooking the Avon at Chadbury.

Wallace Eastwood and his wife Ellen took a greengrocer's shop up Port Street in Evesham. Ellen was all for business and bought fruit and vegetables from her prospective son-in-law. Wallace, who was older, still kept his smallholding up Benge Hill but spent more of his time fishing from his boat on the Avon sometimes all night for tench and pike. How proud he was that he had skated from Evesham to Tewkesbury during the great frost about ten years before.

Bill Bowman told Jim of the bonfire in the Seeds and said, 'I know thee bist busy a-growing sprouts and making gas but I ud be mortal glad if you ud bring your muzzle-loader gun to the fire on November 5th night. Get Jack Ewens to bring hisen, and Smocky Tomkins. It ud be nice,' he said, 'if you would rally a feow shots round the fire on Guy Fawkes night.' 'I'll be there, Dad,' Jim promised 'Just blanks I suppose? If you could get some paper wads ready it would help.' The next day or so Bill made paper pulp ready for Jim to charge his muzzle loader and ram the black powder down the barrel.

Mary Ann trembled at the thought of firearms. She was almost afraid to dust round Jim's gun as it hung under the mantelpiece.

The night came when the village children stood back while Harry Bowman lit the fire, the few fireworks from the shop

banged and sparkled, flames of blue and green Roman candles lit the dark night. Bill leaning on his stick stood by with his lantern.

'Now my bwoys,' he said to the gun men, 'let's fire the salute.' The black choking smoke hung in a pall round the fire as the muzzle loaders disturbed the cock pheasants who answered 'cock up—cock-up' from the wood. The children clapped and Bill Bowman remembered the great bonfire, a Beacon fire lit on Bredon summit to mark the Diamond Jubilee of the Queen in 1897. A thousand of the inhabitants of the villages around Bredon Hill walked that evening to the Beacon all carrying lighted torches.

'I'll never forget it,' Bill said. 'I went gently on in front before it was dark, and to see 1,000 villagers of Bredon Hill making their way with their lit torches was a moving sight. It was as if the whole hill were alight, and at half past ten, just as Pershore Abbey clock struck, the fire was lit and we all sang "God Save Our Queen". Parsons Folly showed up in the firelight as the children sat on the Banbury Stone.'

One can never be sure why Ashton ringers always started ringing for Christmas on Guy Fawkes night. It was never questioned as every year John Stallard, Captain of the 'Tower', got together four more men to pull the ropes, making the iron tongues strike bell metal in round ringing or change ringing. George Bowman, Joe Bradfield and Frank Wheatcroft were joined this November by Jack Alvis on the treble bell. Jim Bowman had to give up ringing on account of his night job at the Gas Works. After the fire in the Little Seeds had died down, the ringers once more echoed the message of the coming of Christmas as sounds from the 'Tower' carried in the night air, meeting the peal of six from Beckford and the ringing at Hinton. Standing on the knol or knollp of Bredon Hill at the Cuckoo Pen, music of three towers could be heard and smouldering bonfires seen.

Bill Bowman at his front door listened to the Ashton men. 'Mother,' he said to Mary Ann, 'Jack Alvis yeon't a bad replacement for our Jim. He comes in with the treble on time every

time. Ah,' he sighed, 'if I never read nor wrote, I did pull the Sally at the Coronation on the treble bell. If we had only had six bells instead of five, then we would have rung as many changes as Beckford. I greased the whole ring of bells in Aysham tower for years and scraped the old grease or dodment off the bearings a purpose to dress the threshing belt to stop him slipping. Threshing reminds me what is gowan to happen over at Cropthorne Heath tomorrow, I've yeard from Fred Burford.'

In the morning the Ricketts brothers drove over to Cropthorne early with Fred in the trap, taking their shuppicks and rakes.

At the Heath, Mabel Burford, who was Giles' daughter, had been to her brother Albert's twenty-first birthday. Old man Giles declared to all the farmers and farm men between Evesham, Pershore and Tewkesbury that the wheat rick that was being built when Albert was born was not to be threshed until he was twenty-one, and Albert should have the money. The Ashton men who remembered this and who had seen the rick thatched and re-thatched to keep out the weather included Snobby Tomkins and Bill Bowman.

' 'Tis all right to go in for these sort of capers,' Snobby said, 'if you can afford it, but when you haven't got two pennies to rub together it's different then.'

'How many times have you been over and thatched that same rick, Ernest?' Bill asked him in the village street.

'Oi, it must be damn nigh a dozen.'

Of course the wheat sheaves were built on a good staddle, timber over staddle stones, faggots of wood over timber, so that not a wheat straw touched the ground, nor could the rats or mice climb the staddle stones because of their mushroom shaped tops. When Fred Burford and his two men arrived they found Mr Giles and Albert with the machine set ready for threshing. The straw thatch didn't take much pulling off as the crows and pigeons in the hungry months had taken it, feeding on the corn sheaves of the roof. Twenty-one years had taken its toll of both corn and straw. The engine started, the machine went through the motions as the Ricketts men pitched the broken sheaves into

the drum.

Old Mr Giles said, 'I'll look after the sacks. I don't reckon it ull be a busy job.'

An hour they worked for neither corn nor straw. All the top of the rick came through as broken straw or rowins and the black crows and quice (pigeons) had threshed and eaten the grain. After lunch a dark brown sample of what dribbled through the hoppers into the sacks. The straw being so short it was impossible to tie it, and the straw tier was uncoupled from the drum.

As the day wore on and Giles's men and Burford's men were choked with dust, remarks were passed about Albert and his coming of age, and what a pity someone hadn't put a match to the rick years ago. 'The old man's faddy,' Fred Burford said. 'He's doted on Albert, never let him mix with the other chaps or girls.' Mabel was born a year after they married, Albert was an afterthought. The old man was damn near sixty when he came along. Mind,' Fred Burford told his men, 'Master Giles a made a smart bit a money and Albert ull like enough spend it one day. Albert's a chap as anybody could twist round their little finger. To tell you the truth, Rickett, I'm glad to be away from um, but I promised we would help thresh this rick.'

Master Giles wheeled the tenth sack of wheat on the sack cart from the drum by dinner-time and it soon became evident that about two tons of corn would be the cast from the rick.

At the White Hart that night Bill Bowman as usual wanted to be in the know. 'How many sacks, Master Ricketts?' he said.

'About nineteen, I think. It was not enough to pay Ernest for the thatching, time and time, again.'

As the steam engine and drum pulled away next day a huge pyramid of loose straw plus the sacks of browned wheat in the granary were all that remained of something which had been looked on as almost as permanent part of Cropthorne as the thatched cottages.

Albert rode his horse to Pershore Mill that day with a sample of the twenty-one-year-old wheat.

The miller sniffed it. It was musty. 'Fowl corn,' he said. 'No

good for bread. Why not buy some cockerels and fatten them for Christmas? I can't give you much for it, if it goes for feed it will have to be mixed with some better corn before I can sell it.'

And so the twenty-first anniversary of Albert Giles's birth was one of folly, for if the rick had been threshed at the proper time and yielded twelve tons of good bread corn and the money invested, Albert Giles would at least have had something to call his own.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DECEMBER

'THEY HAVE took Snobby Tomkins to the Grubber,' Bill Bowman said from his fireside chair, where he sat rubbing his rheumaticky knees close to the oven. 'The cold 'tis crippling to the likes a Snobby, no comfort under the thatch since his missus died.'

Mary Ann knew exactly what was on Bill's mind, the possibility of going to the Union Workhouse if anything happened to her.

'Jim and George looks after us and we bunt beholden to anybody, nor we don't want the Guardians' half-a-crown a week parish relief,' she said, with a little pride. 'According to the *Journal* they have had a bit of trouble at A'sum Workhouse, Bill. I'll read the report.'

Mr Masters said the Salvation Army friends had represented to him that they had offered their surplus papers to the Workhouse, but they had been refused. The Chaplain had resented the Master receiving them and Mr Masters would like the Board's view.

The chairman thought it was for the Chaplain to decide. The Clerk disagreed and said it was for the board.

Mr Masters said the Salvation Army should have the same toleration as others. Mr Hughes asked if there was a Salvation Army member in the house, the answer was No. Mr Lunn asked what the papers were. Mr Masters said the same as sent by other denominations.

The chairman was against the proposal. If adopted, papers could be broadcast. The inmates were well attended to.

Mr Burrow seconded Mr Masters' proposal.

Rev Shechell asked if there were rules, what literature was

received? At present everything was brought in.

Mr Burrow wanted to see the Chaplain's book.

Generally, he said, he leaves the dying, even the dead, for someone else to visit.

Mr Walton resented the remarks re the Chaplain.

Dr Overthrow thought people should be allowed to send in literature but not religious literature.

Mr Masters lost the voting seven to nine.

Bill Bowman said, 'It is to be hoped as they treats Snobby well on Hampton Addlum (headland); we been pals since the Coronation.'

Then Bill thought back over the past year.

'One thing was kept quiet after Ayshon Club last Trinity. One of the bandsmen from Ollerton as played that hinstrument our Jim talks about, the name just don't come to mind, it's the one as they says is called "Push me off the pavement" in Jim's band—Oi, yunt it the trombyone? This bandsman got as drunk as a bob-howlud, full as a blowed tick of beer, cider, plum jerkin, sloe gin and tater wine he stumbled up the Close.'

Then Bill recalled how the man in bright coloured uniform and gold braid lay the night through, sleeping like a lord under the canopy of the stars in an open furrow where the carter had ploughed Hempits. His uniform plastered with Hempits clay, lost on Bredon Hill slopes, his fuddled head guided him to the Camp House at Paris, the cottage with the ring and staple still hanging under the kitchen window, where Oliver Cromwell was supposed to have tied his horse during the Civil War.

The widow woman woke from her sleep at five in the morning and found a military-type man with a waxed moustache drooping with dew, his clothes dirty, his hair as if he had been drawn through a hedge backwards, his cap in one hand, trombone in the other.

The widow screamed, fetched her neighbour, who fetched the police.

The lost bandsman was taken to Beckford Police Station, identified and taken home.

'I know you ull worry about Snobby,' Mary Ann said. 'I'll get our Jim to call and see him on his way to the Gas Works.'

''Tis common knowledge, Mother,' Bill Bowman replied, 'they don't last long in Hampton Addlum, the attendants there pulls the pillows from under their yuds when they be asleep, pushes their yuds back and breaks their necks. No, Snobby won't see another Christmas Day, I'll warrant.'

On the farm at Abel's place the winter ploughing went 'like singing abed'. George Bowman's team of three driven by Arthur Jones turned the stubble an acre a day.

Fred Abel, anxious to finish winter ploughing, went to Gloucester market where he saw what looked like two useful geldings, six years old, sound in wind and limb. Fred bought them, putting them on the train for Beckford Station, as it wasn't possible to unload horse boxes and cattle trucks at Ashton Station. Arthur Jones met the passenger train from Ashchurch with the horse box behind, and walked the two strangers up Rabbit Lane for Ashton.

'They looks useful animals to me,' George Bowman remarked, as he put them in the stable. He ran his hand down their legs feeling for side bones, spavins and the like.

That night George told his dad his gaffer had bought some good 'oss flesh from Gloucester. Fred was anxious to put the horses through their paces, and George having finished eight lands Fred decided to make two plough teams for the hill land, Prince and Diamond to be one, Captain and Dick, the Gloucester horses, the other, leaving Boxer for jobs around the farm, hauling hay or turnips in the cart with Arthur.

'G.O.-ing we are going tomorrow, George,' he told his carter in the stable. 'Look for all the suppletrees, the light G.O. harness for the two pairs of horses, and we will take the two light Ransome ploughs up on that slope above Ashton Wood. Arthur can bring the ploughs and suppletrees in the muck cart with Boxer.'

'Right, Gaffer, my two 'osses will be coming out of the stable prompt at seven although you don't time me with your watch mornings like they do at Dumbleton.' George slumped side-

saddle on Diamond's back, riding.

'I'll have walked far enough by night up the furrow.'

And Abel walked sprightly beside Captain and Dick, not quite sure how they would shape.

'It won't shine the shield board of the plough on this ground, it ull muffle,' said George. 'Bredon Hill limestone don't cut like the vale clay, but there,' he said, ' 'tis two 'oss land.'

Diamond and Prince stopped together like trained infantry as George drew the first straight furrow above Ashton Wood. Back they turned on the headland as they ridged the first bed.

Fred Abel put Captain as his furrow horse, with Dick on the near side. After a little time of see-sawing about they pulled together abreast in some sort of fashion. Dick pulled askew (sideways) as if his collar was uncomfortable. Fred packed stockings of sheep's wool under his collar hoping to rectify this awkward gait. Captain stayed in the furrow but snapped at Dick as he pulled unevenly. George suggested that Dick might work better in the furrow, so the horses were changed left to right. Fred Abel tugged the G.O. reins until his fingers were sore trying to keep a straight furrow. Dick left the open trench, where the plough had turned the ley at that last bout while Captain pushed him back into his place in the furrow again.

Over mid-morning bait master and man exchanged their views of the two Gloucester horses.

' 'Tis like this, Master Abel. Captain has been through this caper before, he's worked in double harness on the plough without a doubt, but that other crater Dick, he unt a farm 'oss.'

Mr Abel said, 'There is only one thing to do, fetch Boxer to take his place and I'll find out the history of Dick. His shoulders aren't sore. Why does he pull askew?'

Mr Abel found Dick's previous owner lived at Tewkesbury and the horse had spent his four working years pulling canal boats and barges, that was why he pulled askew.

So Boxer ploughed with Captain leaving Dick for young Arthur to do the fetching and carrying with the muck-cart.

Albert was a bit ashamed as the village folk stared at him going to and fro up Ashton Street, often with Dick's head near

the grass verge and his ass part in the middle of the road.

But Fred Abel had not learnt all about his buy at Gloucester when he put Captain in front of Dick in the shafts as chain horse to help up Bredon slopes with a load of turnips. All was well until they reached the steeper hill by Paris gardens. Here Captain jibbed, ran back, laid his ears, trembled and showed Mr Abel the whites of his eyes.

'Cup, Captain,' Fred Abel spoke up. 'Pull your weight.' But Captain again refused.

'Another wrong un, Master,' Arthur Jones said.

This was not really true; the fact was that Captain had come straight from the Fens where the ground is as level as a billiard table, and to be all at once expected to pull a load up Bredon Hill was frightening for him. With a lot of patience from Fred Abel, George and Arthur, Captain overcome his phobia of the hills as he took the loaded carts and waggons up the hill tracks. But Dick, he always pulled askew. It seems that once a barge horse, always a barge horse.

'Gaffer,' George said to Fred Abel, 'I'll sell Dick at Candlemas Fair. Let him pull a coal cart in A'sum. I be most ashamed to take him up the road past Bostock's place.'

Every day in December was not a ploughing day. When the wind growled in the farmhouse chimneys, the sleet driven by the north-east wind cut into the faces of the villagers. The heavy-sided ewes pulled hungrily at their hay in the racks, followed Shepherd Bradfield as he scattered the nibbled cake in the trough. Feeding over, men forked the hot steaming muck from the cattle sheds into the carts. When the temperature dropped well below freezing the narrow cart wheels barely marked the frozen ground.

Young Arthur blew hot breath on his freezing fingers as he drove the horses from the shed and tipped his loads of steaming fertilising muck in neat rows on the bare stubble, stubble which would be ploughed later for the purple-topped swedes.

What was Bill Bowman's lot as winter closed in on him once more? On frost-bound road and path, he was fearful to tread. He waited by the fire for news of farm and field, of cattle,

horses and Jim's market garden.

Mary Ann shared his weariness and hibernation.

The village took on a forlorn look as nature almost stood still. Even the brambles ceased to grow, lying browned by the wind and weather, flattened by sleet and snow, hiding in the daytime the rabbits squatting in the rough grass beneath.

There is a bond between man and beast at this season which exists at no other. How often the village men befriend the shivering beast, how carefully the team horses are fed, bedded and watered. Unsparingly the straw is spread knee-deep under the yarded cattle.

Dark mornings, when Bill Bowman heard from his bed the blowing of the storm, pinched cattle waited for the hauled fodder on the frozen pastures.

Fred Abel's kitchen, warm with the hawthorn logs on the open fire, is cosy for Arthur on the high-backed settle. He smiles with face aglow when his master throws another faggot on the hearth and the sparks fly up the great tunnel of the chimney towards the stars. They share, man and boy, the doings of the day. Fred Abel tells Arthur to go easy with the fodder. A long time till May day when once more the frozen Vale between Bredon and Cotswold will grow lush grass, when ewes' soiled wool on rump and tail will tell the farmer Mr Green has come at last.

On snowy mornings men walked silently to work through the drifted lanes, frosty mornings, with sacking-covered boot soles, they walk gingerly over the sheet ice.

Horses slip, school boys slide down the village street to school.

Jim Bowman takes his nag Polly to the smithy for the chisel-edged frost nails to be screwed under her shoes; she walks with confidence over the glassy roads.

The hampered frozen sprouts on Jim's dray glisten like green snowballs in the market. Jim forces parsnips from the cemented ground, shoots at the hungry pigeons on his cabbage.

Dr Overthrow sends Josey Bradfield to bed with a chill. 'Stop there till I come again,' he says.

For three whole weeks Josey sups the tea kettle broth, takes linctus and no doctor appears. His master goes to see him.

'How are you, Josey?' he says.

'I be all right, Gaffer, just waiting for the doctor,' and his master persuades him to go back to work.

There's a while to go till Christmas, the winter is early but a break comes as the frozen ruts thaw to slush again. The hoary thatch drips on the cottage paths, the wind blows softer, the green of the vale and hill is a welcome change from driving snow. The hungry wood-pigeon leaves Jim Bowman's sprouts and the farmer's turnips to nibble the sweet broad red clover now exposed from its protection of snow. Every green leaf is greedily ripped from the plant and unless the farmers guard their leys of clover and rye grass with bird-starving boys or men with powder and shot for their guns, the pigeon will spoil the June mowing leys.

Snobby Tomkins returned unexpectedly from the Workhouse to his cottage. Bostock, Abel, Burman and Syd Jackson agreed to pay him two shillings a day between them, and find him powder and shot for his muzzle-loader gun to scare the pigeons off the greens of December. When the snow returned and the ground was frozen, he paid more attention to the turnips; here the pigeons scratched for the green tops, ragging the crop. The blast of Snobby's gun, the smoke of black powder clouded the part of the field where he waited for the hordes to settle.

Snobby sat on a sack in a dry ditch covered with wood faggots to form a cave, his decoy on a prominent turnip top twenty-five yards from the gun.

Hungry Ashton folk were glad of the pigeons which fell to Snobby's gun. The women stewed them with turnips, the brown breast a poor substitute for the woodland pheasant, but wasn't it meat?

Jim's sprouts brought him more money on Saturday pay day at market than all the grind of the Gas Works, but soon they would be over, and the rabbits were cutting his spring cabbage, leaving them lying in the rows like upturned umbrellas. They did their mischief at night.

'Necklaces they wants,' said Oliver Hampton the rabbit-catcher, to Bill Bowman, as he started his night's refreshment with a quart pot of cider. 'Tell young Jim to bring some wires from Averills of A'sum, I got some pegs. I'll stop their caper.'

On Saturday, when some men unofficially finished work a little earlier, Oliver looked for the rabbit runs on Jim's cabbage patch.

'There be their postcards or currants,' he said when he saw the rabbit manure. 'Here's the mallet, Jim. Follow me,' and the wily Oliver set the wires in a circle around the cabbage patch, as Jim drove the pegs in with the mallet. 'After tea bring the carbide bicycle lamp and we'll see how many be slung up.'

As they walked together by Finches Piece, they heard a squeal as one of the trials of cabbage-growing under Bredon felt the slip knot tighten around his neck.

Oliver took out the rabbits, reset the wires and was round again before morning light.

'They won't plague you after this, Jim,' he said, 'but they do relish spring cabbage on a winter's night.'

In a village like Ashton as the twentieth century dawned you would find outlying cottages built in no-man's-land, built no doubt on old roadside verge or corner. Stolen, you may say, but stolen from whom? The farm land enclosed one hundred and twenty-seven years before was at one time common land.

On such a plot lived Digger Holmes, a plasterer without equal. He raised ten children in a house which he owned, a house he turned into a sort of miniature sham castle. Two stone balls cast by Digger sat like white tom-cats on squared pillars at the entrance to his small barn. In the barn Digger practised his art. He pedalled a primitive lathe turning out round capitals, a barbed-wire-covered line prop covered with lime-sand cement plaster spun round by his bench on the lathe as Digger trowelled, watered, smoothed with his hands to a granite-chipping-covered perfection.

On the walls hung templets and moulds, on the bench potters' wheels for plaster work. The whole place both inside and out was a proof of what a man can do with primitive tools

and sheer audacity. Here was Gothic Art. Pseudo-Norman arches led up to the damson orchard, ornate flower pots on stems encircled with plaster serpents were red in summer with geraniums. Digger went to work in the week; that is to say, he started Tuesday after Monday recovering from a weekend on Ashton cider. His art was in great demand, restoring churches, abbeys and cathedrals, but to see the plastered ceiling and cornices of the Georgian house was to see Digger's work of restoration at its best.

The winter of 1900 was a year when Digger's family were growing up, a year when his aged father from Winchcombe, who still plastered private houses, needed Digger's help. Outside work like rough casting was out of the question owing to the recurring frosts, so Digger took on the job of replastering a country house four miles from home, a contract which his father had undertaken. The house had been empty for some years and the building at the back had been let to a carpenter and undertaken for his workshop.

Digger plastered one room with its lofty ceiling, running his cornices and decorative work around the central gas lamp. Then off to the local pub. His cherry pipe stuffed with a quarter ounce of twist tobacco, he marched, not walked, to the bar. Digger always marched—just something he never abandoned when he left the army. Cider-sodden and bleary-eyed he lined the local lads up in the pub kitchen.

'Number One, Two, Three, Four,' he shouted, sergeant-major fashion.

They obliged and had never seen such happenings in the village.

Home over the fields he made for the country house, where he slept. ' 'Twas cold in here last night,' he thought in his fuddled mind. As he put another block of wood on the open fire, he had a bright idea how to keep warm and free from draughts. Out in the workshop, coffins waiting for the locals when they laid down their tools or ceased to follow the sheep or plough stood in a row.

Measuring one for size, Digger carried it into the front room

by the fire. The house was quiet, unlocked, unbolted. Digger laid the coffin on its side, got in and rolled it over so that the lid side was uppermost. Snug he lay and snored until the village policeman, seeing the firelight through the window, came and shone his lamp straight into the face of a sleeping man in a coffin. Digger sat up, the policeman turned pale, asking what right he had in the house.

Now Digger when under the influence was not the easiest man to deal with, and as he sat there in a box meant for the dead he told the man in blue exactly what he thought of the local police, adding 'And I shall report you to the Superintendent for depriving a working man of his night's sleep.'

Digger became a legend for shooting perched pheasants on moonlit nights with his catapult using lead balls he moulded in clay. He could also douse a lit candle at fifteen yards with an aim where the lead from his elastic passed the flame and missed the candle.

But like so many tradesmen the drink got the better of him and just before Christmas he could be seen threatening his wife, armed with a beer bottle. One of his sons came downstairs and with a blow on to his blue nose floored Digger, who declared that he had been hit by an unseen hand.

Then Digger Holmes bought an eighteen-gallon barrel of cider and trammed it in the barn.

Almost a week away from work brought the building contractors to his door. His excuse for absence was original if nothing else.

'I can't come back until the barrel's empty. The man as owns the barrel wants it returned.'

The men who fed the cattle, worked the horses, lambed the ewes, looked for Christmas, as Bill Bowman said, 'For fittle and drink, to see the children's faces content with so little.' As the season approached the old men at the White Hart said between themselves, 'We allus had our Christmas on January 6th in the Squire's time, Old Christmas Day.' Sam O'Rourke said that Christmas at the White Hart would be on 25th December, the day the parson holds morning prayer at St Barbara's Church.

About a week before Christmas Day winter tightened its icy grip. 'Too hard to plough, Master Abel,' George said as he tried once more to move the rock-like ground with a new ploughshare. His plough, frozen in the ground, he first thawed out by lighting a bolting of straw under the shield board. Joe Bradfield found it hard to move his steep hurdles.

Arthur Jones, in his first winter on the land, cried with chilblained feet and hands as he carted more fodder, more litter, in the muck-cart over frozen ruts.

The schoolboys and girls slid on the moat pond. They slid in the moonlight and lantern light after tea.

On the day the school broke up for the holiday the Governess, helped by the farmers' wives, gave tea and entertainment for the pupils. 'A bun struggle,' Bill Bowman called it, when his grandchildren came back with their oranges and cakes.

The berried holly was tempting food for the birds. George Bowman cut some off the hill for Abel's dining room. Boys climbed the gnarled cider apple trees at Bumbo for mistletoe and sold it to the Evesham shops.

Emma Bowman plucked Christmas geese until the late hours.

Jim Bowman bought a cockerel for Catherine's family in Evesham.

The Ashton farmers bought a side of beef from Collins at Evesham. This was jointed for all the families on the land.

David Ricketts from Fred Burford's was put off work temporarily because of the weather. His brother looked after the stock. David followed the threshing machine for ten days, from farm to farm carrying his shuppick, pitching boltings at half a crown a day. Then just a few days before Christmas he joined one of the Bakers with a melodeon and they sang carols all round Bredon Hill.

The Russians came with their dancing bear to the White Hart. One Russian kept his bear in Syd Jackson's pigsty. Two men from the village near by went up at night to steal a sucking pig. Confronted with the bear they ran hell for leather down from the wood.

German bands played outside the pubs. The uniformed

bandsmen slept in stables and tallets; Tewkesbury drum and fife band played on wintry nights at the bigger houses.

'Oh come all ye faithful . . .' The Christmas spirit was spreading over a poor village, where the children who were lucky got a penny, an orange and a sugar mouse in their stocking.

The servant girls in the farmhouses stoked the furnace while basins of Christmas puddings boiled in the copper.

Sucking pigs were killed and scalded for the master men.

On Christmas Day the stockmen worked until dinner time feeding the cattle. The farmers gave them extra cider. The beef had been portioned out on Christmas Eve.

At Bill Bowman's cottage Bill, in Sunday Chapel suit, sat at the table by Mary Ann saying, 'You carve, Jim, I've sin too many Christmas days to cut straight with the knife.'

Jim carved the cockerel and forked the meat on to plates laden with potatoes and sprouts. Snobby Tomkins was invited and after plum pudding Jim, who had brought with him his bride-to-be Catherine Eastwood, slipped the black shining cylinders on the aluminium barrel of his phonograph. After an Edison Bell record, the music of Christmas rang out, 'While shepherds watched', 'The first nowell', until Bill Bowman said, 'Now let's have Jim's euphonium in a feow minutes, and one of the Bakers is coming with his melodeon, but first of all fetch the tater wine, George. Bring in quart jug.'

Bill's and Snobby's faces were reddened by the wine and the fire gave a Christmas glow to the cottage.

'I got some of my special ginger beer for you and Jim,' Mary Ann said to Catherine. 'I udn't tempt you with liquor now you signed the pledge.'

It was a humble cottage Christmas. The little group sang the afternoon away to Jim's and Mr Baker's euphonium and melodeon.

The frost was putting the ground together outside. In the late afternoon a few crows circled lazily over Abel's wheat. When the tablecloth was shaken in the garden, the robin who claimed that hedged sanctuary left his perch on the garden fork to feast off the crumbs, but a flock of hungry velts left the hedgerow

crab apples for a while.

'To think that little baby was born in a manger,' Bill said to Snobby.

' 'Tis beyond my mind to dwell on it, but I often thinks that thee hasn't got a manger and didst have a donkey.'

At tea time Harry, Emma and the children came and ate Grandma's mince pies, and cracked the walnuts that Grandad had squirrel-like, stored off the village trees.

'Let's have the withy carol,' Snobby said, 'just one more year,' and he and Bill sang a rustic duet of something very much belonging to Ashton Village.

'Come to Land Close tomorrow, Dad. Jim ull bring you on the dray along with Mother. I got a nice bit a biff' (beef), Harry said.

Boxing Day came and Jim took his parents down to Land Close on his dray, leaving the dray for Harry to bring them home.

'Jim's playing with the band tomorrow night; George, Frank, Joe, John and Jack bellringers ull be carol singing.'

George Bowman took a walk to Grafton on Boxing morning to see Albert.

'How did the women get on Mumping Day, Albert?'

'Clinking,' Albert said.

The women took the youngsters to Beckford on St Thomas Day to chant their little piece around the big houses. They were asked in as usual as they sang, 'Bud well, bear well, God send fare well a basket of apples to give on St Thomas morning.' Then out came the cakes and sweetmeats for the youngsters and the mumping money for their mothers.

Then they went to the school where Mr Smith the stores had all the material on purpose for winter use laid out: red flannel and shirts and socks for the men. Here they spent their mumping money, also charity money the parson doled out to such as deserved it.

Then there was bread fresh baked.

'All they do at Ayshon,' George said, 'is the ringers ring the bells about six o'clock in the morning on December 21st., St

Thomas Day, then the younsters come round singing, "Here we come a Thomasin', a Thomasin', a Thomasin,' Here we come a Thomas Day, then the youngsters come round singing, "Here we give them pennies.'

On Boxing evening the Ashton ringers sang their carols around a lantern on a forked stick. 'Hark what news the angels bring', 'All Hail and Praise', 'Arise ye sleepy souls, arise.'

The money they collected was put down in the book by Frank Wheatcroft. Some gave wine to warm the men in the night air.

One shocking man at Paris asked how many of them there were and Frank said 'Five'. The man was upstairs and, emptying the chamber pot from the bedroom window, he said, 'Part that among you.'

'We'll have our oen back one day,' Frank said. 'He keeps ducks on the stream, I reckon we could eat one apiece when he got some young ones.'

The next few days till the old year went out were without incident. Dr Overthrow was called out as usual after Christmas when some villagers had eaten or drunk too much. He expected it—his horse was in the trap ready.

'It's like this,' he said. 'When folk live on bread and scrape all the year, a good meal at Christmas is too much for the digestion.'

And so ended 1900 in old Aysham. It was just as Barnes wrote of Dorset Christmas:

> And every one shall tell his tale,
> And every one shall sing his song,
> And every one shall drink his ale
> To love and friendship all night long.

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